HEAD TO HEAD: PS4 VERSUS THE NEXT XBOX

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Once upon a time, the next gen didn't begin till hardware manufacturers said so. Now software makers, such as Epic with its Unreal Engine, have that say. We reveal the realtime prototypes that demonstrate the potential of videogaming's new era

HYPE
YAKUZA 5
LUIGI'S MANSION 2
STARCRAFT II: HEART OF THE SWARM
DUST 514

POWER

INSIDE EPIC'S VISION FOR THE **NEXT GENERATION** OF VIDEOGAMES

REVIEWS
DEAD SPACE 3
THE CAVE
STRIKE SUIT ZERO
PERSONA 4 GOLDEN
SLY COOPER: THIEVES IN TIME
PROTEUS

#251
MARCH 2013



We don't just play games any more

And not because they so often try to play you as much as you hoped to play them. In this issue, we meet gamers who have found something more in this pastime than pure entertainment. There are the powergamers (p78), players who dedicate their lives to being the very best in MMOGs, and even make money by offering their services and knowledge to others. Not all feel proud about the time their passion has absorbed, but they've transcended the idea that games are only recreational.



There are casters such as Sean 'Day[9]' Plott (p74), who smartly leapt from professional eSports to commentating. His talent is in explaining the profound depths of *StarCraft* tactics, and he's become part of eSports' steady transition from player-focused niche into globalised spectator sport, bringing with it huge boosts in prize purses and sponsorships.

And there's a strange echo in our cover star, Unreal Engine 4 (p64). From its start, an integral part of Epic's engine has been its scripting language, UnrealScript, which formed the basis of the vibrant modding culture that sprang up around *Unreal Tournament*. UnrealScript has been a vital part of developers' toolkits, but Epic has stripped it from UE4 in favour of C++, one of programming's global languages. This form of professionalisation away from UE's modding past is perhaps a minor point in Epic's vision for the next generation of games, but it underscores the sense that the next gen is about supporting global standards over creative niches. Games are jobs now, not toys, and not all players are just players.

Sony's design for PS4 exemplifies that notion, its standardised PC-like components a move away from the technological niche of PS3's Cell processor. As we reveal on p16, it will record your play and a button will allow you to immediately upload that video to the Internet. Valve's Erik Johnson told us in **E**250 that he sees players as content producers and entertainers. Like it or not, games won't just be games any more.



games



Hype

Play

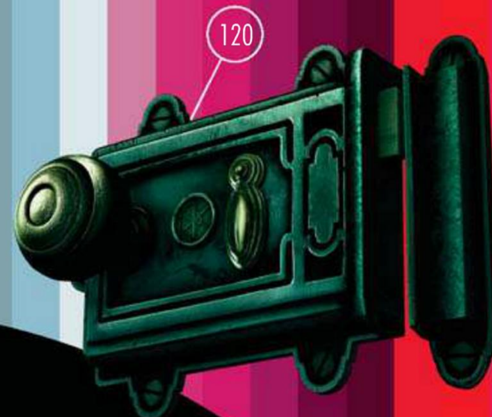




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1



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6



2



WLEDGE

There's a new breed of console on the horizon, one based on a massive but culturally second tier mobile gaming OS. Can Ouya (1) and its ilk turn the Android platform into a serious contender for the living room's big screen? Or are these boxes simply a niche within a niche? We ask developers what they make of the incoming wave of robot-powered microconsoles on p12. These newcomers will have to contend with Sony's new PlayStation and Microsoft's next Xbox, though, and we finally have concrete confirmation of some of their specs and features. Unwrap the next gen (2) on p16. In East London, meanwhile, film/TV sculptor Aden Hynes has transformed Brick Lane into 8bit videogame to promote the UK release of the animated film Wreck-It Ralph (3). We take a look on p18. Then on p20, we report on how Valve's Steam Box plan (4) could help Linux become a full-on gaming platform. Thinking creatively after that lot? Well, **Edge** has joined forces with EA for our Get Into Games Challenge (5) this year, which you can find out about on p22. In Soundbytes this month, we hear from Jason Rubin and Atsushi Inaba (6) on THQ's fire sale, and US senator Leland Yee on gamers' credibility problems. Finally, on p26, we chat to actor Warwick Davis (7) about getting blisters from *Pac-Man*, and his own app game, *PocketWarwick*, in My Favourite Game.



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game news and views

Rise of the robot

As Ouya heads Android's rush for the living room, what do developers think of its chances?

Android is shaping up to be a strong contender for the dark horse of gaming in 2013, with companies from the established Nvidia to newcomer Ouya attempting to bring it onto screens in the all-important living room. It won't be easy, though, and not least because everyone is pulling in different directions.

As a quick primer, Android is a mobile, touch-focused operating system released in 2008. It's based on Linux, and it's open source, making it a low-cost choice of OS that any hardware manufacturer can use and even freely customise. Phones such as HTC's flagship One phone use it, as do Amazon's Kindle Fire and the Samsung Galaxy Tab.

Its real market share is hotly debated, with estimates ranging from 75 per cent of the smartphone market in Q3 2012 (IDC), to 44 per cent in Q4 (ComTech). What's not in question is that it's a heavyweight competitor, one that can at the very least go toe to toe with the iOS juggernaut, while others – such as RIM and even Microsoft – squabble over single-percentile scraps.

Even so, it's iOS that gets the biggest share of attention. When a new game such as *Letterpress* takes the world by storm, it's never on a Samsung handset. On the face of it, the more widely spread, more open Android should be dominating its rival. Instead, it's culturally still in second place.

There are a number of reasons for this, from Apple's early advantage to its marketing savvy. Android bears a number of self-inflicted wounds, though, including the fact that its primary store, Google Play, has had trouble with stocking malware and fake products.

The big problem for gaming, of course, is fragmentation. Android can be put on almost anything. Developing for iOS has become more complicated with the launch of Retina screens and the taller iPhone 5, but remains a relatively easy process – a small selection of devices to develop for with set resolutions, known CPUs, memory and features. Android devices, however, can be any size and any version or fork of the OS, and everyone naturally expects everything to be available and just work.

This isn't necessarily a deal-breaker, but it is a profound complication. "We probably won't be doing Android ports in-house any time soon," says **Adam Saltsman**, creator of iOS game *Hundreds* and also of free-running progenitor *Canabalt*. His stance mirrors that of most developers we speak to. "Even if we had a massive device-testing library, we would still probably have to hire QA staff or contract an external service to make sure we were shipping something solid."

Android devices can be any size, any power, any version, and everyone expects everything to work

"Beta testing on Android is taking much more time than on iOS," agrees **Marek Rabas** of Madfinger Games, maker of cross-platform shooter *Shadowgun: DeadZone*. "OEMs (original equipment manufacturers) are getting worse at releasing several variants of one device with different hardware in different regions. When someone asks why your game isn't running on their phone, you don't even know if it's a Snapdragon, Exynos or Tegra CPU."

FREE TO PLAY?
A common misconception about Ouya is that all its games will be free to play, funded by microtransactions. Some will be, but the rule is broader. Everything simply has to offer some free element, even if it's just a demo from which the full game can be unlocked for one big payment. Developers can also implement more granular purchases, such as character and level packs, consumables such as health potions and energy, or anything else that suits a particular game's needs. Everything goes through the central Ouya store, as with Apple iOS, with developers getting 70 per cent of all in-app sales, and Ouya taking a 30 per cent cut.



Ouya's controller initially featured a disc-style Dpad, but after feedback on dev units, the final version will be cross-style

With developers increasingly finding even iOS a hit-or-miss proposition, it's no surprise that newcomers are wary of branching out. "We don't really see a winning scenario," says **Rami Ismail** of *Super Crate Box* creator Vlambeer. "Either it's a hit and we have to support a range of devices we don't own ourselves, or it's not, and we've wasted time."

Ouya is a chance to change this. It's a dedicated console aimed at the living room, which used Kickstarter to ask the world for $950,000 in development funds and ended with $8.5 million in August 2012. Its challenges range from persuading developers to devote resources to making games for it to producing hardware in sufficient quantities to be a player. It's also not exactly a powerhouse, with its Tegra 3 quad-core processor accompanied by only 1GB RAM.

Being its own system offers many advantages, though, including being able to offer developers a custom marketplace. It's also a device to port to and develop for that includes a physical controller. Ouya will be its own dev kit, too, and being based on established technologies allows for easy porting to the system and away from it, perhaps to a competing console or the wider Android ecosystem. The only big restriction is that users will be locked in. Ouya won't run Google Play apps directly, and its own content won't work elsewhere without being ported.

"We hooked it up and within 20 minutes were sitting on a couch playing some of our own games with a controller," says Ismail, one of the developers Ouya reached out to early on. "Ouya using Android is clever – it



Ouya is a self-contained and rather tiny brushed steel box. As well as games, it's launching with media centre support, and outputs at 720/1080p over HDMI

means the system supports a wide variety of tools out of the box, ranging from Unity to Game Maker Studio and Adobe AIR."

This is, of course, a possibility for any of the forthcoming Android-based systems, which could be a powerful advantage for developers looking to build games for these new consoles and in turn for the hardware manufacturers. Fostering a broader software market brings with it more reason to buy the hardware, and with more units in homes comes a wider audience for software.

"There's always some potential value to supporting experimental platforms, because if you can be there before it gets too successful, you can do extremely well," says **David Edery** of *Triple Town* maker Spry Fox, who also managed XBLA in its early years. "The first XBLA developers were very well rewarded. But a small developer has to pick their battles, and there are an overwhelming number to choose from nowadays."

The path to this hypothetical future is indeed scattered with roadblocks, if not land mines, starting with the fact that when Ouya boasts of having "great content from triple-A game publishers such as Square Enix," it's talking about a port of 1990's *Final Fantasy III*.

Big-name developers, including *Minecraft* creator **Markus 'Notch' Persson**, have expressed approval for and interest in Ouya, but have yet to announce development plans. As Android has proved in the mobile market, it's not enough to just offer technical advantages – customers need to get excited. Right now, there are excellent Android games, but the platform still lacks showpiece titles to point to as a reason to choose Android over iOS.

And with Ouya being just one of a raft of Android-based console announcements, the issue of hardware fragmentation has once again reared its head. Every system has its own specs, with no consistency in power and chipsets. Each also has its own control scheme, and in most cases, its own store. There's little point or profit in simply turning out a generic box and hoping. Well, except for companies set up to flood the market with cheap offerings through economy of scale. Even then, Ouya's standard-setting $99 price has left little wiggle room.

"The whole game industry is at a crossroads, and we have so many different systems now," says Madfinger's Rabas. "We have PC, consoles, handhelds, phones, tablets, cloud, hybrids… It's like the 1980s. Every company wants its own system." And those systems vary dramatically as the players line up to fight for attention.

The Archos GamePad, for instance, combines a 7-inch tablet with Vita-style twinstick controls for a low price (£130). It's been criticised in reviews for the quality of its components, incompatibility with some leading Android games and existing software relying on key-mapping instead of official support. Nvidia, meanwhile, used CES to announce a handheld with the codename Project Shield, a rather glossier device that combines a controller with an attached touchscreen, and hedges its bets by both running Android games and streaming games being played on a local Wi-Fi network in a similar fashion to Sony's Remote Play for Vita/PSP and PS3.

Then there are the crowdfunded projects. Another Kickstarter success, the GameStick, takes the form of a controller with pop-out wireless HDMI dongle to turn any TV into an Android gaming system for $79. Less successful was the eSfere, which aimed to raise $390,000 by its Indiegogo campaign's end in January. It offered a rounded console unit with a touch controller that looked like a Wii U GamePad without a screen. Players would stick silicone buttons onto the latter for physical controls, and it was initially offered alongside a matching decorative vase set. This may help explain why it only made $2,404.



Ouya titles announced so far include *Shadowrun Online* (above) and a prequel to *Human Element* from *Call Of Duty* developer Robert Bowling

PIRATE GAMES

Android has a bad reputation for piracy, though the developers we spoke to didn't seem too concerned. "We could exclude a platform based on piracy numbers, but that would just mean the people who do want our games get victimised," says Vlambeer's Ismail. "Is there a digital game platform that doesn't suffer from piracy?" shrugs Spry Fox's Edery. "Piracy is a fact of life. You can ignore it, or you can try to fight it, or you can play a different game and embrace folks with a F2P model." "Android users tend to be tech savvy, and with that comes more piracy," adds Adam Saltsman. "But at the same time, there's a huge sustainable audience that doesn't care about boot loaders and just wants a good game or two. I don't think that has any impact on it as a commercial platform."



Triple Town creators Spry Fox point to F2P in-app purchases as a way to help minimise the risk of piracy

All of these ideas have a potential place as part of a wider ecosystem, though in most cases they will feel like a niche within a niche until Android becomes a respected gaming platform in its own right. In our conversations with Android developers, the basic Ouya box is seen as by far the best hope for everyone at the moment, both for its early success and for being relatively simple in concept – a device to be built on, not a potential one-time gimmick.

"There's definitely a niche in the low-end console market that could be filled by the Ouya," says **Jack Shiels** of South Africa-based Knife Media. "I think that the branding behind a console is possibly even more important than the console itself – we all know how badly new-to-market devices like the Game Park did. Only time will tell how well [it does], but I feel a certain confidence due to its fanbase, which helped to establish a good image."

That means there's much riding on its success, with only two real outcomes. One will establish that, yes, Android is a worthy development platform that developers should finally throw as much weight behind as iOS. The other will tell us that, no, Android remains in its paradoxical prison as the world's biggest niche. We'll be able to see which direction things head from April, when Ouya starts to hit retail and Android takes its first shot at the living room.



Ouya should have no trouble pushing in HD U4iA's browser-based *Offensive Combat* (above) and Madfinger's smartphone FPS *Dead Trigger* (below)





Ouya is based on a Tegra 3 chip, which when paired with 1GB RAM is easily enough for mobile gaming. But the chip's successor, Tegra 4 (due to feature in Nvidia's Project Shield), was announced in January. Ouya will cost $99 when it is released in April

MICRO IN MACRO
1 Nvidia's Project Shield combines a controller with a screen. It also features PC streaming as well as native games and apps. 2 Android's open system makes it possible for others to provide general controller support for games, opening up the market for devices like the GamePad. 3 The eSfere touts a Tegra 3 processor and more RAM than Ouya, but has so far roundly failed to raise funds. 4 Game Stick is a USB-sized console that slots into its controller. 5 Snakebyte is pitching the tablet-like Unu as a more mainstream Project Shield competitor. It also has a controller

Microsoft versus Sony: round three

The wait is over: hard data emerges concerning the next Xbox and PlayStation hardware

Until recently, we were treating most information about the incoming generation of gaming hardware from Sony and Microsoft as rumour, but now we've received concrete confirmation of several features, which provides valuable insight into how the consoles will match up. The information comes from a source with experience of developing for both new platforms, and clarifies somewhat how the two companies will distinguish their offerings this time around.

While details about the design of the new Sony console aren't yet known, it has been confirmed that the machine – currently codenamed Orbis, but expected to be officially called PlayStation 4 – will ship with a redesigned DualShock controller that features a touchpad in place of the existing central cluster of Select, Start and PS buttons. Since the controller is no larger than the existing DualShock unit, this touchpad will be on the small side, which presents limitations to its use in gaming applications. The technology is based on Vita's rear touchpad, and thus apparently proves similarly responsive in action.

A NEXT-GEN CHRISTMAS

Both Microsoft and Sony are set to launch their next console offerings by Christmas, although getting units into sales channels by November will be the goal. Or at least that is the case in the US – we have been told by an unofficial source that Sony's console won't arrive in Europe until early 2014. In terms of official demonstrations of both consoles, certain thirdparty studios have been asked to deliver polished demos in March, giving Sony and Microsoft the option to make reveals at the Game Developers Conference in San Francisco on March 25-29. However, Sony is also planning a future-focused announcement on February 20, which may well see it show its hand early.

A more innovative element than the touchpad is the redesigned controller's Share button, which will launch a feature that will allow screenshots and video to be distributed online. In play, the PS4 hardware will continually record the most recent 15 minutes of onscreen action (with no processing penalty, it is claimed), which users will then be able to edit, package up and broadcast easily. Clearly Sony has been inspired here by the extraordinary power and reach of YouTube and other Internet video offerings, but nevertheless it's a surprise to see the feature being awarded such prominence.

> In play, the PS4 hardware will continually record the most recent 15 minutes of action

Less surprising is the existence of a revamped PlayStation Eye peripheral, which remains compatible with the Move controller and is claimed to measure up favourably in comparison to the new, more responsive iteration of Kinect that will ship alongside the next Xbox (codenamed Durango). Unlike Nintendo, then, both Sony and Microsoft are continuing to invest heavily in motion control, although such an interface is believed to be more central to the next Xbox experience than it is to PS4's.

Microsoft's next console is more committed to networked environments, too, and its games will require an Internet connection in order to function. Xbox Live will therefore become an integral rather than optional feature. Crucially, the necessity of an Internet connection to play any game will eliminate the secondhand game market as it is known to 360 owners. As well as being made available for download, games will still be sold in physical form (as 50GB Blu-ray discs) with activation codes, but they will have no function beyond the initial user.

Given its experience with 70 million-plus 360 console sales, Microsoft has accumulated enough user data to make the decision to go online-only with its successive hardware one that adds up. But what proportion of 360s are used to





Star Wars 1313 **(left) and** ***Watch Dogs*** **have been the most visible next-gen console titles to date. Microsoft is said to be positioning Ubi's game as a key property in demonstrating its next Xbox**

Sony's S5100 Blu-ray player, due in March, shows that the company remains willing to experiment with consumer hardware aesthetics. Can PS4 afford to be as wilfully offbeat?



play secondhand games? How many players' buying habits are in part defined by the ability to trade in their old games? What happens when that is taken away?

Microsoft's hand has been guided by the PC gaming landscape, and viewed through a particular lens it makes sense, even if unbelievers will take some convincing. Ultimately, Microsoft has asked itself a simple question: who wants to play games on a next-generation Xbox and yet doesn't have access to the Internet? The answer: not enough to make a considerable difference.

We haven't yet received word on Sony's plans for always-online play, but leaving its own secondhand console game market as it exists today would be an easy PR win in the next-gen console battle.

The company has already earned an enormous amount of goodwill among studios working with PS4 development hardware. Privately, Sony representatives have conceded that the company made a mistake in creating such esoteric architecture for PS3, and its strategy for PS4 gives developers more opportunities this time around. Partly this is because it is much more PC-like in its makeup than PS3, but importantly Sony is encouraging coders to get closer to the metal than is currently possible on the next Xbox. Microsoft's development environment is more ordered, with studios forced to work only with approved libraries, while the console's OS overhead – stacked up as it is with so many non-gaming elements in order that the hardware can be more of a fully fledged entertainment hub than a straight game console – presents more constraints than are evident in Sony's comparatively liberated approach.

When it comes to raw processing power, Sony also has the edge. We have confirmed with sources that recently leaked tech specs are accurate, and they portray a powerful new PlayStation.

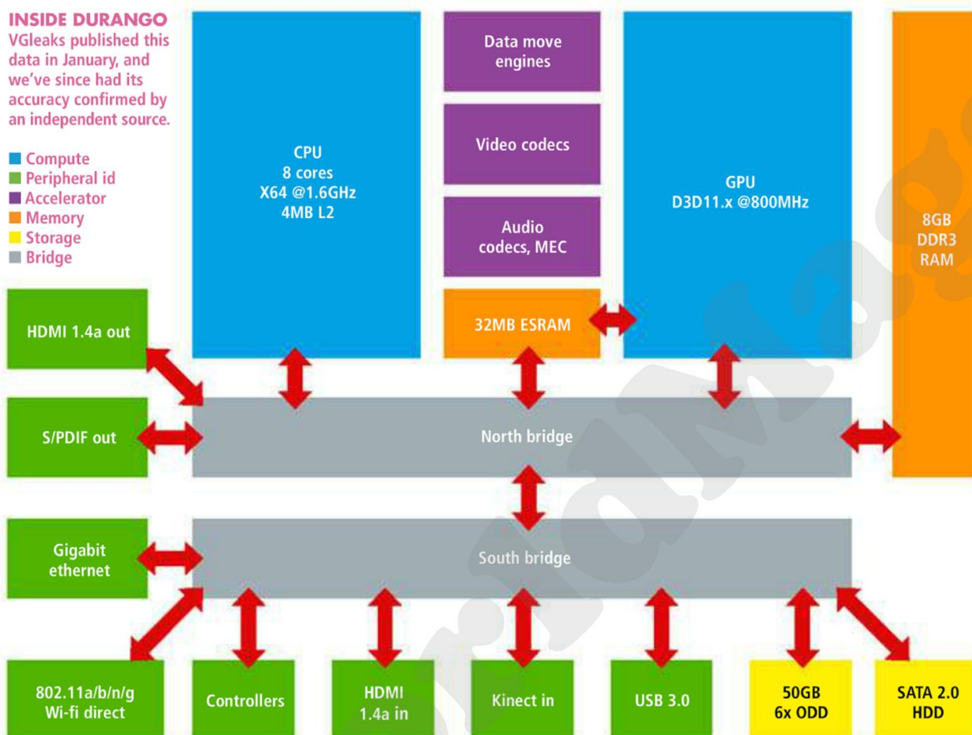
Though Durango devkits offer 8GB of DDR3 RAM, compared to Orbis's 4GB, Sony's GDDR5 solution is capable of moving data at a sizzling 176 gigabytes per second, which should eliminate the sort of bottlenecks that hampered PS3 game performance. Importantly, we're told that the final PS4 hardware will match Microsoft's 8GB, such is the extent of Sony's desire to succeed in the next-gen market.

Both platforms are driven by eight-core AMD CPUs clocked at 1.6GHz, with Microsoft opting for a D3D11.x GPU from an unknown source and Sony utilising a more capable solution in AMD's 'R10XX' architecture, alongside the so-called 'Liverpool' system-on-chip.

A development source familiar with both platforms tells us that in real terms Sony's hardware is "slightly more powerful" than Microsoft's, while also being "very simple to work with". Ultimately the performance differences between the two consoles will have as much bearing on multiplatform releases as the differences between PS3 and 360 have during this generation (read: very little), but Sony will be expecting big-budget firstparty releases such as the *Uncharted* sequel to demonstrate its console's superiority.

Where does Sony's Gaikai acquisition fit into all this? How does the new Kinect hardware measure up? We'll be looking at both of these issues and more in the coming months. ■

INSIDE DURANGO
VGleaks published this data in January, and we've since had its accuracy confirmed by an independent source.





Wreck-It Ralph hit American cinemas in November, garnering positive reviews and topping the ticket sales chart in its opening weekend. The film didn't come out in the UK until this month, though





CRAZY TAXI

How an 8bit street art exhibit took over an East London road for a weekend

In order to generate awareness for the UK opening of its animated film Wreck-It Ralph, Disney transformed East London's Brick Lane into an '80s videogame. To achieve this, the company hired veteran film and TV sculptor **Aden Hynes** to create a variety of pixellated installations. Though the taxi was obviously intended to be his pièce de résistance, the most endearing sculptures were perhaps the ones you might miss if you weren't paying attention, such as two blocky pigeons perched on a drain pipe, or the dollop of 8bit dog poo. "I played 8bit games as a teenager," says Hynes, "so it was great to realise that vision in three dimensions. In many ways, the retro styling has much more charm than the hyper-reality of today. I've never been asked to make an 8-bit taxi before."







Valve turns

Valve's open source Steam Box could help Linux become a key player in the next generation

Linux has never been considered a player in gaming, but it's never had a supporter like Valve before. Having publicly declared the recently released Windows 8 "a giant sadness [that] just hurts everybody in the PC business", **Gabe Newell** is throwing his company's weight behind not only legitimising the platform for games, but creating a new Linux-based console that will bring it to the living room: the Steam Box.

Valve has several reasons to make this happen. Traditionally, PC gaming has been bound up with Microsoft and its technologies, such as Windows, DirectX and DOS. Love or hate Windows 8 and its shift to a more tablet-focused design, it's been a cold reminder to everyone of exactly who owns the platform, and the attempted migration to a more locked-down world of Microsoft apps and services hasn't been popular.

It also obviously threatens Valve, whose Steam gaming and digital distribution service is today's de facto face of PC gaming. Linux, however, is an open platform. Anyone can create a version of it, known as a 'distro', and while creator **Linus Torvalds** and his team maintain the core code – the kernel – everything can be 'forked' in different directions and built on by anyone with the desire and technical skill. Ubuntu, for example, is an attempt at a Windows-style interface that anyone can use, while Debian is aimed at more experienced users. For Valve, Linux means a platform with nobody else calling the shots – and especially not a direct business rival with a new console of its own on the way.

The official Valve-created Steam Box isn't due until 2014, though that's only part of the attack plan. Other firms will be able to build their own versions, with



Free software activist Richard Stallman has complained that unlike the OS, games released under Valve's plans won't be open source



THE BIG PICTURE
Just because Steam Box is set to use Linux doesn't mean users will ever actually have to deal with it directly. Big Picture mode was officially launched at the end of 2012, and will almost certainly be Steam's default view in future devices. It's intended for use on TVs, providing access to games, the storefront, friend lists, and controller-based web browsing. From comments made by Gabe Newell, you'll be able to dig deeper into your system if you choose to do so – just like with a regular PC – but this UI should cover the majority of gaming needs.

Newell hinting that a 'Good', 'Better', 'Best' ethos will be used in lieu of complex system specifications. Under this regime, a Good box would likely be built around streaming, similar to tools such as OnLive, with a Better box having a dedicated GPU/CPU and the tightest restrictions, and a Best box being a device of a certain performance plus anything else the manufacturer wants to throw in – a Blu-ray drive, for example. The official Steam Box won't be locked down if anyone wants to install Windows on it, though it will ship running Linux. Valve's challenge over the next year is to get enough support from other developers to ensure a good lineup for gamers willing to take that plunge.

There's no need to wait to try it, though. Steam for Linux entered open beta at the end of 2012, and is freely downloadable. At the time of writing, 61 games were available, including *Amnesia*, *World Of Goo*, and *FTL*. Notably missing from that list are any genuine big guns, or even recent Valve games, such as *Dota 2* and *Portal 2*, though that's not surprising. It takes money and effort to port a game to Linux, especially if the PC version relies on such Microsoft technologies as DirectX, and the market is too small for most non-indies to justify even thinking about. So far.

> Steam is so popular that many indie devs view getting in as the difference between life and death

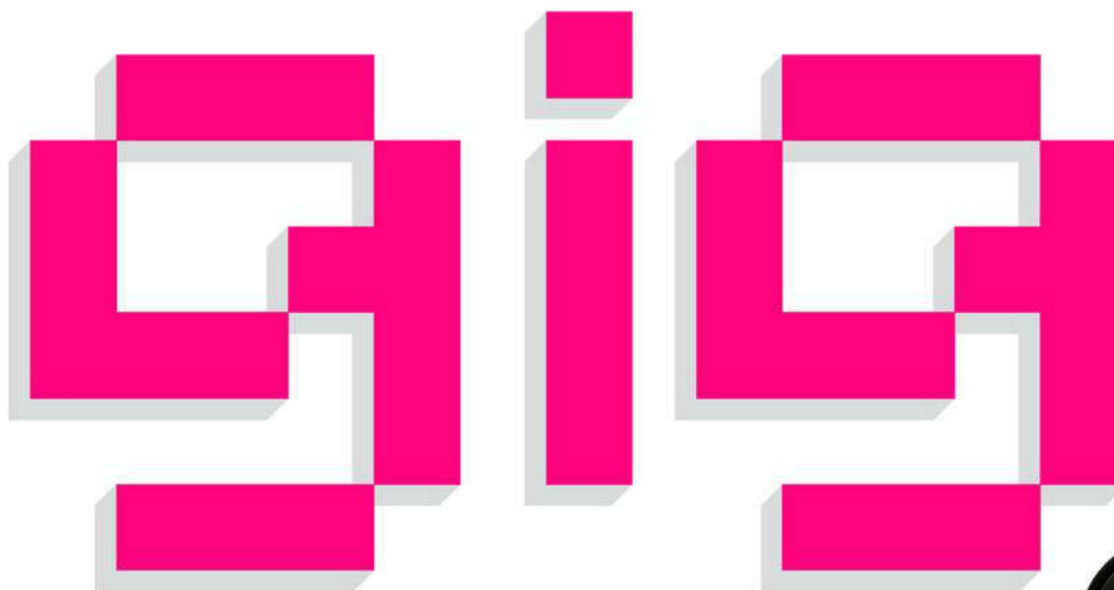
Valve is no stranger to playing the long game, though. When Steam launched, it was near-universally despised as an unwanted intrusion that was forced on everyone who wanted to play *Half-Life 2*. Now, it's so popular and so prevalent that many indie game devs consider getting into its catalogue as the difference between life and death, and many proudly admit to buying games they already own just to have them in their accessible-anywhere Steam libraries.

But despite the advantages of Linux, success is far from guaranteed. For starters, while the number of distros available has advantages in terms of freedom, it also represents a compatibility nightmare for developers and less experienced users. Linux itself, while rock solid in many ways, is also an immature platform for games – arguably on more than one level. In mid-2012, Torvalds openly described Nvidia as being "the single worst company we've ever dealt with", before literally giving it the finger on camera and adding, "Nvidia, fuck you!" for good measure. Yet without dedicated hardware as well as software support, triple-A games might be dead in the water.

Finally, of course, there's Valve itself. Valve may be David when compared with Microsoft, but it's Goliath next to the likes of EA's Origin and Ubisoft's Uplay. For these key publishers, a Linux-based gaming platform controlled by Valve isn't inherently any safer or more profitable than a Windows one controlled by Microsoft. Even if it's successful, and Valve plays nicely, it means yet another platform to support – at a time when even Windows gamers are often left out of big launches or served with less-than-stellar ports. It'll take more than Valve simply wanting it to happen to get past all this, but this isn't its first dance, and it would be unwise to bet against it. ■



The Xi3 Piston was inaccurately described as the Steam Box at this year's CES – but it does have Valve's support, and is the kind of small form factor PC we can expect





EDGE GET INTO GAMES 2013
IN ASSOCIATION WITH JOBS.EA.COM

Take up the challenge

Win Unity Pro accounts and an expenses-paid trip to the Unite conference in our browser game contest

Following the success of our game-creation competition last year, we're about to start inviting entries for a new challenge. From March 4, the Get Into Games Challenge, in association with EA, will throw down the gauntlet for individuals and teams to design a game to a to-be-announced theme and build it in the Unity engine for web browsers.

The winner and two runners-up will each win a Unity Pro licence, including iOS Pro, Android Pro, Flash Pro and the Team License add-ons, which are worth $6,500 in total. The winner will also be awarded a trophy and a trip for one to Unite 13, Unity's annual developer conference, which this year will be held in Vancouver from August 28-30. They receive a Unite 13 ticket, return flights and accommodation for three nights.

Watch our website on March 4 as we launch the challenge and announce the theme. Games will be judged by a panel of leading developers, Unity principals and **Edge** staff against three main criteria: their creative interpretation of the theme; their technical merit; and their originality. The closing date for entries will be April 15.

Last year's challenge, which was based on the theme of 'edge', was judged by ex-Bungie designer Jaime Griesemer, Media Molecule designer Mark Healey, PopCap co-founder John Vechey, thatgamecompany co-founder Kellee Santiago, Unity CEO David Helgason, Unity CCO Nicholas Francis, **Edge** editor-in-chief Tony Mott and editor Alex Wiltshire. Find out this year's lineup nearer to launch.

The winner of our inaugural challenge was *Edge Of The World*, a highly polished take on the shuffleboard game set on the Spanish Main and made by a two-man team called Central Core Studios. The runners-up were *Framework* by Quick Fingers and *Edge By Night* by Anthony Beyer and Alexandre Colchen.

Visit www.edge-online.com/tag/gig_challenge for more news, further details and full terms and conditions.



bit.ly/VxbEU1
Keep up with news on the challenge



















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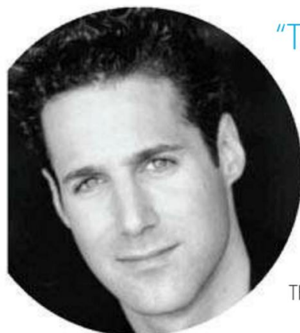
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Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



"The fact that nobody bid for the team and title **is a travesty. It makes no sense to me** If I weren't barred from bidding as an insider, I would have been there with my checkbook."

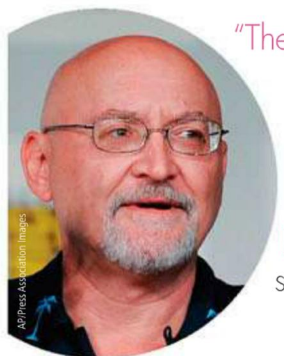
THQ president **Jason Rubin** on Vigil Games, which was notably not sold at THQ's asset auction

"Gamers have got to just quiet down. Gamers have no credibility in this argument. This is all about their lust for violence and the industry's lust for money."



AP/Press Association Images

California Senator **Leland Yee** on the response to the US's $10m study on violent media



AP/Press Association Images

"The company [that made] *LA Noire* threatened to **sue the shit out of me,** TNT, every company that actually ever worked in Hollywood. And they have the billions of dollars to back it up, apparently."

Shawshank writer **Frank Darabont** needs a new name for his LA-based noir TV show

"In THQ's studio and IP selling off auction, *Darksiders* is unsold? [We] wanna buy it… on the cheap."



Platinum Games producer **Atsushi Inaba** glimpsed value where western publishers saw none

ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



Game The Wizard Of Oz
Developer Jersey Jack Pinball

When WMS Industries dropped out of the pinball market, Stern became the world's last pinball manufacturer. But with the opening of Jersey Jack Pinball in 2011, the industry rose again, if only a little.

After two years of work, Jersey Jack will ship its Wizard Of Oz-themed table in March. The first 'widebody' machine built since '95, *The Wizard Of Oz* is a massive 28-inch table with a spinning house and other mechanical toys, a headphone jack, surround sound, a 26-inch widescreen monitor in place of the usual LED score readout, and a crystal ball displaying moving images at the centre.

It's a machine stacked with components ready to go wrong, but *The Wizard Of Oz* is designed to minimise the need for costly maintenance that contributed to the decline of mechanical pinball.

Jersey Jack is already working on its second table – *The Hobbit* – but with *The Wizard Of Oz* retailing for $7,000 and needing more arcade floorspace than Stern's new $5,699 *Avengers* machine, its gamble on scale and spectacle is a risky one in an already fragile market.



My favourite game Warwick Davis

The star of Life's Too Short discusses Battlefield, The Bitmap Brothers, and his favourite Star Wars game

Actor **Warwick Davis** is perhaps best known to one generation as Wicket the Ewok from Star Wars: Return Of The Jedi or as the protagonist of the Lucas-produced fantasy adventure Willow. To others, he's more familiar for being Professor Flitwick in the Harry Potter films, or the star of TV mockumentary Life's Too Short. But since a fateful meeting with Darth Vader, he's been a gamer at heart.

STAR QUALITY
Davis' film career began in the early '80s, when, as an 11-year-old Star Wars fan, he won a dream role as Wicket the Ewok in Return Of The Jedi. He's since appeared in over 40 films and TV shows, ranging from horror series Leprechaun to blockbusters such as the Harry Potter films. He's the co-founder of talent agency Willow Management, which represents actors under five feet tall, and recently released *Pocket Warwick*, a virtual Tamagotchi app written by and starring Davis himself.

What was your earliest experience with videogames?
My very first experience of a game was the [Sinclair] ZX81. David Prowse showed me this very rudimentary game in his office, which had a frog jumping across logs that were floating by, and I thought it was amazing. I then bought a ZX Spectrum, where it would take maybe half an hour to load the game – kids don't know how lucky they are these days. There was a TV show at the time about computer games [Database] where they would broadcast the code for a game with a modem-type sound, and you'd have to record it so you could play it back into the computer in order to play the game – though one time my mum ruined it, because she came in with the Hoover while it was recording. Then the Atari 2600 came along, and that had a nice bit of wood veneer on the front, and I played a lot of *Pac-Man*. The joysticks back then were really hard to push, and so I used to have blisters on the inside of my hands from playing too much.

So were you mostly a console gamer?
Well, after a while I got the Amiga computer, and the games on that were some of the best ever. I loved the Bitmap Brothers' games, particularly *The Chaos Engine* and *Speedball 2* – I was really glad to be able to get that on my iPhone.



Have you found yourself with less time to play as your career has developed?
In our house, we've got every console there is at the moment. I use gaming as a motivational tool, actually. Some people do it the other way – a lot of gaming and a little bit of work – whereas I do a lot of work, and then ten minutes on the PlayStation is my reward. It's a way of motivating myself, and it's a good de-stresser, too.

What games do you unwind with?
I enjoy *Grid*, and driving games in general, though not if they're too simmy. *Grid* seems to find that balance between reality and playability, which I really love, and I love the damage you get on the cars. One of my favourite games on the PlayStation was the original *Destruction Derby*, and on *Grid* you can get a similar kind of experience with some of the events. Another game I play as well is *Battlefield*. I'm no good at it at all, but it's kind of fun to run around and jump in tanks, and I enjoy the freedom it offers. When I was growing up playing games, I used to think, 'Wouldn't it be great if you could get in that vehicle or go in that building?' And you never could because the maps were so limited. But now these games are vast: if you can see [a vehicle], you can usually drive it or fly it. I'm no good at the fighting or war elements; I just like the idea of wandering around discovering things.

"I'm no good at the fighting or war elements; I just like the idea of wandering around discovering things"

You've coauthored an app in *Pocket Warwick*. Do you find yourself playing games on your phone, or do other apps take up the time?
Well, there's so much you can do on your phone now, isn't there? So you do have to make a conscious choice: am I going to use that free time to play a game, or am I going to catch up on Twitter, or look at the stock market? [I play] *Pocket Warwick*, obviously, but I also really enjoy the *Reckless Racing* games on the iPhone.

Do you have an all-time favourite game?
One personal favourite I didn't mention is *Star Wars Battlefront* on the PS2 – I used to spend many happy hours playing that. There was a two-player mode on it, which I used to play with my daughter… All-time favourite, though? I don't know. I want to say *Speedball* or *The Chaos Engine*, I think.

It'd be nice to have *The Chaos Engine* on iPhone, right?
It would work, wouldn't it? The Bitmap Brothers games had all these little graphical details, the great soundtracks – it was such an immersive experience. I wonder why they never got round to updating all [of them] for all the new consoles. Imagine *Chaos Engine* on the PS3 – it'd be great. ■



Davis even has his own app game, *Pocket Warwick*, a Tamagotchi-like experience where you must nurture the actor to super-stardom

WEBSITE

Tim Burton Pokémon
www.bit.ly/O19eny

Sweeping redesigns can be interpreted as either homage or insult, but this one is most definitely the former. Lifelong Pokémon fan Vaughn Pinpin (AKA Hat Boy), a Visual Communication student at the University Of The Philippines College Of Fine Arts, has set about redesigning all 151 of the monsters from the original Game Boy entries. He has reimagined their cuddly anime contours via the lens of Tim Burton's stop-motion oeuvre, all bulbous eyes and funhouse-mirror proportions. But the characters take on a new kind of charm in the metamorphosis. Pinpin has finished roughly the first third of the Pokédex and, although he's currently on a brief hiatus, he has assured his readers that he hasn't given up on the project and will "knock a few ones out next week after midterms".





VIDEO

Mario's mushroom secret
www.bit.ly/VxFDej

It seems remarkable that *Super Mario Bros* can still be yielding secrets 28 years after its release, but YouTube user Tamurasse has found a surprising thing about its end-of-level fanfare. Play that celebratory cascade (which remains one of the most satisfying aural delights in videogames) really fast, and it sounds near identical to the effect that plays when you collect a mushroom. Want to verify that? Here's the mushroom effect slowed by 500 per cent: www.bit.ly/WAyiss. Yet another insight into a legendary game.

WEB GAME

Red Rogue
www.bit.ly/X2liOO

In the developer diary for *Red Rogue*, creator Aaron Steed explains that he spent an evening tweaking so that when you got a critical hit the heroine Rogue decapitates her monster opponent and boots its head along like a football. The idea amused him so he put it in. It's one of the many surprises tucked inside this 2D Flash game, which looks like a lo-fi *Spelunky*, complete with bats, spiders and arrow traps. The major difference is that *Red Rogue* doesn't allow you to jump, so stomping enemies to stun them involves climbing and falling from above. Combat is automatic: you simply shove into enemies and Rogue will get slaying. Nathan Gallardo's moody soundtrack adds wonderful atmosphere to the experience and, despite the slow start, the rewards of exploration will keep you ensnared for hours.



THIS MONTH ON EDGE

The clump of commodities that piqued our attention during the production of **E**251

MASTER CHIEF DESK LAMP

www.etsy.me/Wn6nKf

If a successful business is all about finding a hole in the market, Kentucky resident Michael McLane ought to feel pretty good about his line of stained glass desk lamps celebrating touchstones of pop culture. And though the One Direction wall light may not be to your liking, don't even try to pretend that you wouldn't want to sit at your desk and read by the light of this Master Chief helmet desk lamp. The piece took roughly 40 hours to complete, since each piece of glass must be cut by hand and soldered together using copper foil. There's only one and it's selling for $840 (approx £545). Just think how many used copies of *Halo 3* that could buy.



continue

SDA for charity
Speedrunners pushing the clock as low – and the donation counter as high – as possible

Kamiya on Twitter
Bayonetta dev turns Twitter into ongoing Q&A with fans, offers candid replies

To infinity...
Disney has the IP to be so much more than just a *Skylanders* rip-off

Nintendo Direct
Announce-o-mania

quit

The new wild west
Prolific game streamer Destiny jerked around by Own3D.tv. Cheque's in the mail, naturally

Kamiya on Twitter
You're allowed to ignore the guy asking about your boob size preference – really

NRA hits iOS
On the plus side, making guns this boring could stem shootings

Next-gen spec war
Pissing match redux



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TWEETS

Fun Fact: The Mac icon file for *The Cave* is larger than the entire size of the original *Maniac Mansion*.
Ron Gilbert @grumpygamer
Creator, The Cave

I feel like Justin Bieber is the first stage of Pokemon in whatever evolves into Vanilla Ice.
Zelda Williams @zeldawilliams
Actress and blogger

I think in my next game I'll simply cut to the chase and have an IAP for the #1 leaderboard slot.
Jeff Minter @llamasoft_ox
Game developer

Our apologies for the *Fruit Ninja* tweet sent earlier. One of our kids played the game on our iPhone and unknowingly tweeted their score.
Dallas Police Department @DallasPD
Law enforcement unit



DISPATCHES MARCH

Within Dispatches this issue, Dialogue sees **Edge** readers discuss growing old in the eyes of games, the difficulties Valve faces in building the Steam Box, and Game Freak's very own chance to evolve. You also bemoan games getting it in the neck for being violent again. Then, in Perspective, **Steven Poole** discusses zombie logic and the worrying spectre of unintentional advocacy for the NRA, **Leigh Alexander** suggests we should have the violence talk among ourselves, and **Brian Howe** catalogues a circle of Hell even Dante would avoid.



www.edge-online.com
Discuss gaming topics with fellow **Edge** readers



Issue 250

Dialogue



Send your views to edge@futurenet.com, using 'Dialogue' as the subject. Our letter of the month wins a 3DS

Age gate

For the sake of the authenticity of the experience, I created a virtual player in *FIFA* with my real birthday: February 29, 1972. Then at the end of the season, together with the praise for a job well done, I was rewarded with offers for coaching a number of teams. No sign of the option to continue my player career for my bald, overweight, 40-year-old alter ego. That epiphany has represented the equivalent of a golden watch for my videogamer career, too. Unmistakably, I had to acknowledge that I am too old for this. The realism that I was seeking, the El Dorado for my generation of gamers, hit back at my dreams. Or perhaps I should be grateful for having had a full season in Serie A, for the thrill of a few goals and the futile satisfaction of completely irrelevant stats power-ups? Where's the glory of being able to change just the name of your player in *Kick Off*? What about the illusion of the ultimate, infinite videogame? Where's Dino Dini?
Nicola Dallatana

We made our *Saints Row: The Third* character 35, and were shocked to find such a haggard, scarred and faintly manic visage staring back at us. The truth hurts, especially in HD. Rest assured, there's no retirement age on your **Edge** subscription.

A clean slate

Just wanted to drop a quick note to say congratulations on the iPad version of **Edge** – it (along with an iPad Mini in the Christmas stocking) has finally got me to swap my print subscription for an electronic one, which will help with the piles of back issues teetering atop my coffee table. One small moan, however: it would be lovely if you could avoid the use of small, in-page scrolling areas for anything other than short passages. The Dialogue section I'm writing this from only lets me read from about a third of the screen, which is a tad frustrating on an iPad Mini.
Alex Reid

We're glad you're enjoying **Edge** on your new iPad. We're continually working on improvements, too, so feedback like this is always welcome.

Evolve or die?

It seems to me that *Pokémon X* and *Y* represent the first meaningful innovation for the pocket monsters since *Gold* and *Silver* hit shelves back in 1999. Not just because it's getting a polygonal makeover but because it's the first *Pokémon* ever released on time here in the west.

Everyone has a *Pokémon* in them and mine was *Pokémon Red* in the winter of '99, some three-and-a-half years after its Japanese release back in the dark old days when PAL regions were treated like Mordor. Almost 15 years later, the rise of HDTV has put paid to the appalling 50Hz ports, but Nintendo are still the last of the major publishers who think a multi-month delay is acceptable in an Internet-enabled world where competitive gaming and global communities are a thing. And that's why I wasn't playing *Monster Hunter 3 Ultimate* on my 3DS back in December 2011.

The wise old men at Nintendo take a relaxed attitude to progress these days, and that often translates to their games – it's taken 17 years for *Pokémon* to go 3D, which is almost admirable in its stubbornness, really. For contrast, *Zelda* took 12 years and *Mario* took 11 (so long as you're counting from *Super Mario Bros* and not *Donkey Kong*, which would bring that figure up to 16). *Metroid* wins, taking 18 years, but all these games were born in the 80s; *Pokémon* was released on the cusp of the 3D revolution and somehow stayed resolutely 2D until this year – a time when fans are so starved of innovation that they get excited about walking diagonally.

Game Freak have a licence to stagnate. Competitive gaming communities do all they can to discourage meaningful change beyond slight spreadsheet tweaks, and every old feature is brand new to the kids for whom *X* and *Y* are their first Pokémon games. Both groups – competitive gamers and children raised on the TV show – would both be perfectly happy playing *Pokémon Fire Red* and *Leaf Green* until the heat death of the universe, so why innovate? When *Pokémon X* and *Y* just does what *Street Fighter IV* did a few years ago – the same basic rules, a few new mechanics, some polygons and some online options – that will be good enough for everyone likely to play it.

But I remember when *Super Mario 64* and *Ocarina Of Time* dragged Mario and Link into three dimensions and changed games forever. Perhaps everyone was a little braver back in the 90s, but *X* and *Y* is *Pokémon*'s chance to evolve, so it seems a shame to stop at polygons and a sensible release date.
Bob Akeins

Perhaps, but it's a start, and after years of barely discernible iteration it's nice to see the series trying something new – especially when series sales figures suggest Game Freak could have continued treading water and watched the millions flow in.

Seems legit

In **E**250, Tadhg Kelly talked about broadcasters' view of games, saying they're seen as "ultraviolent death machines". To some extent, I would agree with this, but I do feel a slight change in the air that games are starting to be taken more seriously, or at least are more appreciated, by the masses. But it's still true that many people in the media and general public have little knowledge of the profundity that games are

capable of, only thinking of them as something for teenagers or a way to pass the time on the train. What they don't realise is that, in some respects, videogames can access a greater level of meaning than film or literature by having the player influence the events around them, rather than just being informed about them, and by providing players with a personal experience.

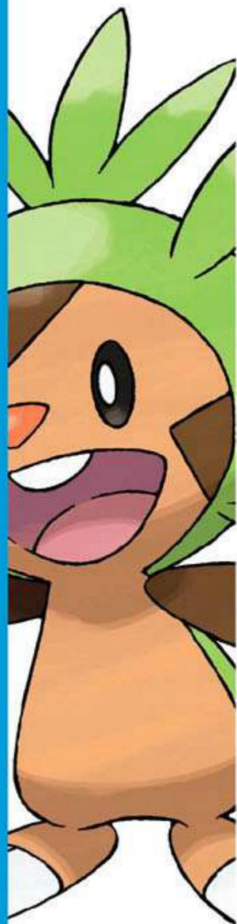
When those people in the media and general public look at mainstream franchises like *Call Of Duty*, they do just see an ultraviolent death machine, and they think that's the pinnacle of the industry just because they're the biggest. But these games, mined into stagnation by their publishers, are not a real reflection of what the industry has to offer. It's about allowing the player to experience something meaningful and different, and forge their own path through a variety of environments and situations. It's in the indie market where games are really starting to thrive, and thank goodness, because without funding platforms like Kickstarter, publishers could very well have caused the industry to crash, like in 1983.

It's unfair that games are not yet fully acknowledged as an artistic medium and are often blamed for travesties committed by young people – such as the tragic shooting in Connecticut. Though the player may be shooting a terrorist in the head in the game, what they're really doing is just pressing a button; I would say most people know the difference. Some films depict graphic scenes of death and killing, and yet, if someone commits a horrific murder, people don't automatically assume it was because of violent films. People have even committed murders directly influenced by films, such as the recent Aurora shooting during a showing of the Dark Knight Returns and older copycat cases of Natural Born Killers. It's not just films either – the book Catcher In The Rye is perhaps most famous for being carried by John Lennon's assassin.

It seems strange that only games get such a bad rep, and it's mostly due to the fact that people don't really understand what games are. Gaming is still a relatively young medium, and, in terms of academia, there is comparatively very little critique on it compared to film and literature. Also, most courses at university cater to development, not game study. For games to truly become as globally accepted as film and literature, and stop being viewed so bluntly by the media, this is definitely something that needs to change. And even though public views of gaming are changing slowly within some circles, many people have yet to comprehend their true potential and artistic merit.
Amy Kline

"It's unfair that games are not yet fully acknowledged as an artistic medium"

We all ought to help spread the word that for every *Call Of Duty* there's a *Proteus*, too. Think back to the video nasty in the 80s, though. That today they're a distant memory suggests games simply need time to continue working their way into culture.



Bob Akeins hopes Game Freak will do more with *Pokémon X* and *Y* than a graphical update

Hot air

Inspired by the tiresome will-they-won't-they fuss over Valve's mooted Steam Box, I set about building one of my own: a PC powerful enough to outperform the current generation of consoles in a form factor sleek enough to sit under the TV. And I now realise the job Valve – and, indeed, console manufacturers – have on their hands. I don't mean putting the thing together, but in striking a balance between aesthetics and practicalities such as CPU cooling. I got the smallest case I could, but it's pretty cramped in there, and those three onboard fans might keep things cool, but I often wish they were quieter.

The RROD fiasco suggests Microsoft sacrificed functionality for the sake of form in 360, and I assume it's learned its lesson. Sony put too much in the PS3, resulting in a hulking, unpleasant design and a prohibitive launch price. Clearly hardware design is all about sacrifice and compromise. As a software company, Valve is facing these sorts of problems for the first time, and I can't wait to see the solutions it comes up with.
Ryan Jackson

It seems as if Valve realises it doesn't have all the answers, and that there won't be one Steam Box, but a whole range. Have a 3DS to tide you over till they're here.

ONLINE OFFLINE

Your responses to topics on our website at www.edge-online.com

HMV is dead, long live HMV

The job losses aside, I see this as deadwood being cleared in a dense forest to allow for new growth.
Dan Dare Wadeson, Facebook

Deadwood being cleared? Why? Does the high street currently have a lack of pound shops?
Alistair Taylor, Facebook

It was the only dedicated CD & DVD store left in my town. Admittedly, I didn't shop there that often although I used [the] website every so often. It was also one of the places which kept GAME's trade-in prices in-check.
Nishan Fuard, Facebook

The Edge Developer Awards 2012

Mostly agreeable; though Mojang to be so high up provided chortles; and a lack of Frictional Games provided facepalm.
Theo Neumann, Facebook

Naughty Dog, massively overrated, though certainly top 50, as is Kojima (overrated). *Minecraft* is a phenomenon, but not sure Mojang should be quite so high up. Ubi Montreal deserved better placing.
David Hood, Facebook



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STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

The implications of our zombie fixation, and why it might be playing straight into the hands of the NRA

Zombie physics is a mysterious business, as a cooperative romp through *Resident Evil 6* has lately reminded me. When zombies mutate in moments from man-sized to building-sized, or suddenly sprout an enormous extra limb, where do they get all that extra mass? Do they somehow suck energy out of their surroundings and convert it instantaneously into matter? Or are we to suppose that the zombie that has grown in seconds to multiples of its previous size is now mostly air? Did it basically just inflate rather than grow?

If the zombie did merely inflate, though, that only poses the further problem of why it doesn't just pop like an enormous balloon on the first tickling of a bullet, or float away into the sky, given that we can suppose the interior of a zombie to be quite warm, and thus the air filling it to be hotter than the ambient temperature. Yet neither of these things happens, and the megazombie stomps around quite as usual, occasionally displaying its swollen red weak spot like a baboon on heat. Yes, with Capcom's zombies it seems to be conundrums all the way down.

To spend evenings gleefully headshotting (or arse-shotting) these more-or-less humanoid (or centauroid) monsters might seem less than completely clean fun when one remembers the recent horror of the latest school massacre in Newtown, Connecticut. To be sure, nothing in a videogame has ever been as obscene as the National Rifle Association's subsequent call for teachers to be armed with guns. During the global prurient media circlejerk that followed the killings, certain 'news' outlets did not neglect to claim that the perp was "obsessed" with violent videogames. Of course, tens if not hundreds of millions of people around the world are obsessed with videogames, violent and not, and the vast majority do not graduate to murdering children. But what if videogames in some sense were actually performing stealthy PR to the benefit of the gun lobby, even without meaning to?

> What if games were performing stealthy PR to the benefit of the gun lobby without meaning to?

To make such a case, one would call in evidence not the mass of military shooters, nor the sci-fi shooters, but the genre that at first sight appears the most harmlessly fantastical: the zombie game itself. More generally, we are living through a peculiar mass-cultural moment of salivating zombie hegemony. The rotters are simply everywhere: on TV, in film and in literary mash-ups. Why are we so obsessed with zombies in a world of global warming and financial meltdown?

We might begin by remembering that, for reasons of political pragmatism, zombies make acceptable cannon fodder in a way that Germans or Native Americans no longer do. (Although even zombies do not necessarily immunise you from all such political criticism, as the *Resident Evil 5* controversy showed.) Yet simple ethnic neutrality cannot be the whole explanation for our zombie fetish, since on that score aliens would do just as well.

What's really going on at the level of subterranean ideology in the land of the dead, or so it seems to me, is that the zombie-apocalypse scenario is a libertarian paradise. It is in such fictions – from The Walking Dead TV series and game to *DayZ* and beyond – that the anti-'big government' survivalist gun nut is proven right not to have relied on the state (because now its mechanisms no longer function), and right, too, to have stockpiled firearms (because how else are you going to kill hordes of shamblers?). In this brave new world where it's every man – and his guns – for himself, the weak will no longer be protected (by a pansy socialist state apparatus), while the paranoid firearms enthusiast might even at last get the girl. In this way at least, almost all zombie-based media content is a flat-out advert for the NRA's omni-gunnery interpretation of Second Amendment rights.

At one point in *Resident Evil 6*, you actually have to hold out against hordes of oncoming zombies in a gun shop. (Ridiculously, it doesn't occur to anyone to open the cabinets full of gleaming guns and use them when they run out of ammo, but never mind.) And though that game's protagonists are mainly government operatives of one rival branch or another, the survivalist-citizen argument is still made by implication, since all the unarmed civilians we come across are just wildly screaming rotter-fodder; indeed they are dangerous precisely because they are unarmed, always threatening to get bitten and become enemies themselves.

So zombies represent a libertarian utopia – but perhaps, and even more disturbingly, they represent an existential utopia, too, whatever your politics. Maybe, after all, we don't dream of proving ourselves as survivors, raiding grocery stores and snuggling up to a warm gun; perhaps we dream instead of being the zombies themselves. Freed from the obligation to think, to navigate the treacherous waters of professional and social life, we would just shamble around, moaning contentedly in a modernist atonal chorus, and munching on the stupid living. No responsibilities; no pressure. Nothing to fear except a shotgun in the face, and you're already dead anyway. Don't those zombies, after all, seem quite happy?

Steven Poole is the author of Trigger Happy: The Inner Life Of Videogames. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net



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LEIGH ALEXANDER

Level Head

Perhaps it's time to have a real discussion about violence in videogames among ourselves

Years ago, a longtime English friend of mine told me he was considering visiting New York. I promised I'd show him an ancient subway station, and our great old Art Deco buildings. He laughed gently, and told me Americans don't know what old means.

Likewise, America's 'thing' about guns is probably hard for people outside of our country to understand. But part of it comes down to the fact that we *are* young, relatively – a nation founded in revolt and the dream of making our own rules, free from oppression. The average American's understanding of history is the stuff of sepia-toned storybooks: noble patriots penning our Constitution with the provision that the government will never try to take away its citizens' right to carry arms in case they need to defend their freedoms.

The "right to bear arms" seems to much of modern civilisation like backward-looking paranoia – the kind of thing only relevant to Confederate caricatures. But when such people grasp for their weaponry, they think they're protecting a principle crucial to their national identity, and they see judgment of that as the very sort of threat to their freedom that they think they need guns to protect.

I'm anxious to spend even three paragraphs talking about something other than games. Over the countless articles about art, culture, feelings and media I've written, I've learned to cringe in wait for the first commenter to wonder what this has to do with videogames. But guns, and attitudes to them, have long had something to do with videogames, whether we acknowledge it or not – and the fresh horror of a mass shooting in Newtown has brought our industry under the microscope yet again.

Just as America has a thing about guns, we also have a thing about blame. I wonder if my homeland's attitude to dealing with tragedy has anything to do with what we like to see as our heritage of successful revolutionaries. It's saddening but unsurprising that once again the industry is being called to account for its 'role' in the culture of violence people believe led to the latest tragedy.

> Doesn't walking away from the discussion communicate a resistance to self-examination?

Wanting to believe every event is part of a clear, logical set of factors is understandable; I think that urge to live in systems where every action has an outcome that makes sense is part of what attracts us to play and make games. It's just a tough thing as an industry to go through repeatedly.

Recently, US Vice President Joe Biden invited industry leaders to the discussion table alongside gun advocates and religious groups to answer an explicit question: what will the game industry do to reduce the occurrence of mass shootings in America?

On one hand, engaging with the question of what the industry will do to reduce violence suggests a dangerous embrace of responsibility, even an admission that our products have, in some way, contributed to the fetishisation of weaponry and violence in wider culture. On the other hand, doesn't walking away from the discussion – "games are entertainment protected as free speech, they don't create real-world behaviour, and we've got reams of data to prove it" – communicate a concerning resistance to self-examination? Isn't that a depressing rejection of the meaningful role games play in the cultural landscape?

Handling this latest round of scrutiny would be easier if we'd been willing to have this conversation among ourselves before now. We've had a destructive double standard for too long: games are legitimate, worthy of respect, and encourage positive behaviour. But at the first sign of criticism, we run – games don't cause anything; they don't mean anything. They're just for fun.

Both can't be valid. Data that categorically supports or rejects a direct causal link between games and behaviour won't materialise in a way that will satisfy everyone. Even if it did, it wouldn't be enough. Media is an ecosystem that's as likely to reflect who people already are and what they care about as it is to influence us. And every individual is different, affected by their climate in unpredictable ways.

But games don't get to be, as the International Game Developers Association calls them in its letter to the Vice President, a "unique artistic medium" and claim a conversation about cultural climate doesn't concern them. Of course, we can reject the idea of a causal tie with horrific acts. We aren't to blame, but absolution doesn't end an informed conversation.

Look, commercial triple-A has been profiting from lavish adoration of guns for this entire console generation. We, the media, are trained to applaud when marketing shows us videos of digital headshots. We have clearly not thought much yet about what this says about game development or the role of games in society, but the answer cannot possibly be nothing. The days of 'What does this have to do with videogames?' are gone.

Games are a young industry founded in escapism and revolution – but if we're clinging to unexamined ideas about our isolationist 'rights', our moral impunity, then we're no better than the weapons advocates we'd like to accuse instead. We should decide to join the conversation that keeps coming to our door. First, though, it's clear we need a better idea of what it is we really have to say.

Leigh Alexander is a widely published writer on the business, design and culture of videogames and social media

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BRIAN HOWE

You're Playing It Wrong

Cataloguing the special circle of Hell that's been reserved for the designers of irritating game enemies

Reaping what you sow. Poetic justice. The punishment fitting the crime. Contrapasso. By any name, it's wickedly satisfying when someone gets exactly what they deserve. Imagine how good it would feel to ruin something Uwe Boll loves for a change, or to hear that parrots had pecked out Gilbert Gottfried's voicebox. This pleasing vision of symmetry between sin and retribution was immortalised in Dante Alighieri's Inferno, where hypocrites are weighed down by gilded cloaks, warmongers immersed in boiling blood, and flatterers steeped in their own bullshit. But even the circles of Hell turn with time, and this month we're going to visit one that Dante and Virgil never catalogued, perhaps because it was just too terrible to behold – or perhaps because the invention of the medium was still over 600 years away. Welcome to the 873rd circle of Hell, where designers who've mucked up good games with one or two ludicrously annoying enemies get their comeuppances.

Hell's videogame subdivision is young but fast-growing, sinking to new levels all the time. In the 872nd circle, game designers who made their text illegible on standard-def TVs wait out the aeons in a library where all the books are smeared with petroleum jelly. In the 874th, designers who spitefully hid Quick Time Events deep in cutscenes get shanghaied by devils whenever they try to go to the loo. But perhaps most diabolical of all is good old 873, where game designers who crossed the line between challenging and irritating in their enemy design spend eternity beset by the worst videogame pests. At least that's what I imagine in order to console myself when Varkids, those hateful little flow-breaking ankle-biters, are gnawing away at my health bar and patience in *Borderlands 2*, which is otherwise such a silky-smooth experience that stumbling into a Varkid nest is like getting donkey punched by a masseuse. Which videogame miscarriages would stock this infernal bestiary? In my petty, malicious fantasy, it goes something like this.

> There are no lakes of ice or pillars of flame, just endless grey corridors in every direction

For immediacy's sake, imagine that you are the *Borderlands 2* team member who said, "You know what would be good? A war of attrition with inexhaustible swarms of insects." After living out your naturally allotted lifespan – I'm not a monster – you are justly condemned to the 873rd circle of Hell. It's divided into different 'Bolgie', which I'm pretty sure is Italian for spawn points. There are no lakes of ice or pillars of flame, just endless grey corridors branching off in every direction, many blocked by invisible barriers. Suddenly, out swarm the Varkids! If they're not nipping at your heels, they're bombarding you with acid gobs from unseen heights, having metamorphosed in mere seconds. If they're not doing either of those things, then they're doing both at once, juggling you around like a combo practice dummy in a fighting game. 'OK,' you think as you futilely struggle to regain control of your movements, 'I'll grant that this is not fun. But it's pretty cool to see something I made up in the flesh, even if it's attacking me in a vindictive fantasy afterlife. This isn't so bad.' You, sir or madam, have not accounted for the Blue freaking Wizzrobes.

Oh that's right, my strawman friend. You're still getting tossed around by Varkids like a nerd's violin case – and while I'm dreaming, let's throw in a few Cazadores from *Fallout* – when the Blue Wizzrobes from *The Legend Of Zelda* crash the party, swerving like drunk drivers and unleashing dense torrents of deadly laserballs in no sane pattern. Flame can't hurt them. Neither can bombs, arrows or magic wands. So good luck getting close enough to stab them with all those Darknuts clanking around all hugger-mugger, then pivoting invulnerably towards you with telepathic accuracy. Sorry, did I fail to mention the Darknuts? I got distracted by wondering why the monsters in a 1986 Japanese game seem to have been named by Snoop Dogg.

Despite this flash mob of Varkids, Cazadores, Blue Wizzrobes and Darknuts hampering you, maybe you'll manage to progress through the corridors a bit. You'll wish you hadn't when the Medusa Heads from *Castlevania* come shimmying in, and they've got all the crazy birds from *Ninja Gaiden* in tow, turning jumping into a death wish. Lakitu from *Super Mario Bros* rounds out the aerial front, incessantly dropping his spiny, fun-killing bombs. And even if you manage to get rid of him, he'll just come right back, his unchanging facial sprite somehow looking more smug. Not that you'll be able to make out his face after the Marlboros from *Final Fantasy* show up, barfing thick green clouds of toxic gas that afflict you with every status effect from astigmatism to baby colic. Ever tried to run under the erratic leaps of a Big Eye from *Mega Man* while suffering from some serious baby colic? You will, and it sucks. Pull it off and your reward is a big, juicy kiss from a Poison Head Crab, which will at least soften the blows of the coup de grâce, Super Macho Man from *Punch-Out!!* whipping off 20 consecutive insta-kill helicopter punches at your head.

That's how much I hate Varkids.

Brian Howe writes about books, games and more for a variety of publications, including Pitchfork and Kill Screen

#251



THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH



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Up-to-the-minute
previews and reviews

Building on cliché

At first glance, *StarCraft II*'s (p42) races are hackneyed. There's the rough and ready Terrans, pugnacious frontiersmen; the noble and severe Protoss, mystical keepers of arcane (read: arbitrary) technology; and the animalistic Zerg, an all-consuming alien horror.

We've seen all these archetypes repeatedly, not least because they pull from many existing science fiction and fantasy universes, but they draw perhaps most obviously from Warhammer 40k. The Terrans are an adaptation of the Space Marines, the Zerg come from the Tyranids, and the Protoss are much like the Eldar. Blizzard's been careful to layer in some of its own ideas, though, exchanging the Space Marines' imperial inflection for one of Wild West grit. And while the Eldar are a physically frail race, the Protoss are tough and durable. For the Zerg, Blizzard adapted the Tyranids' approach to evolution and took on a propensity for spines and maws, but gave them more individual intelligence. And even the foundational ideas are hardly unique to Games Workshop, because it in turn borrowed freely from the likes of Alien, Tolkien, and Hollywood's reading of Imperial Rome.

Look deeper, though, and another picture appears. *StarCraft*'s races are designed to be glanced at, their properties immediately apparent. The Zerg are legion, part of their intrinsic design, which is about mutation and creating a swarm quickly. The clean technology of the Protoss expresses the comparative expense and strength of each unit. The Terrans are practical, diversifying by building base add-ons.

That second glance, which takes in the archetype and connects it to a role, is where *StarCraft*'s art comes alive. The overfamiliar becomes the comprehensible. The new player sees the Terrans transforming from power-suited rip-offs into a race they can grasp enough to start playing. And with complex systems to master, they need all the help Blizzard's artists can offer.

MOST WANTED

Luftrausers PC
Vlambeer created the brilliant 2D dogfighting game *Luftrauser* over a feverish two-day stretch in 2011. A polished, fleshed-out sequel is on the way, and we couldn't be more ready to take to the skies again.

Bayonetta 2 Wii U
The ninth Nintendo Direct presentation was Platinum's first proper demonstration of *Bayonetta 2*, but revealed little. When Satoru Iwata said it was "too early for details" he wasn't exaggerating, but new combos and angels promise a dramatic expansion for *Bayonetta*'s combat.

Company Of Heroes 2 PC
Relic's take on WWII's Eastern Front measures territory control not by the street but by the house and makes the winter as deadly as enemy arms. Salvaged by Sega, the marketing plans might change, but the game's nearly finished, so its 'Q1' release can't come around fast enough.

Despite having the Zerg infestation flushed from her body at the end of *Wings Of Liberty*, Sarah Kerrigan has returned to lead the swarm, providing a semi-human face to the squirming horde. She hasn't got the most charming personality, though – oddly, her Zerg friends provide the laughs

HYPE

STARCRAFT II: HEART OF THE SWARM

How do you solve a problem like the Zerg?

Publisher Blizzard Entertainment
Developer In-house
Format Mac, PC
Origin US
Release March 12

Not that anyone really needs any further persuasion, but Blizzard again proves its mastery of CGI with the intro video to *StarCraft II*'s second episode, *Heart Of The Swarm*. The Zerg attack a Terran city, their flailing tentacles and purple slime befouling its wide and faintly European neoclassical boulevards. Facing them is the heavy metal of the Terran forces. Marines unload their rifles into the impact craters from the Zerg's drop pods; Vikings are smashed by the tusks of stampeding Ultralisks. In a vast square, a line of dug-in Siege Tanks shells a tsunami of writhing talons, bone, spines and mucus.

It's the classic Zerg rush, then, and a tableau that more or less follows the action in the game itself, even if you're not used to seeing it from such dramatic angles. And the Zerg – innumerable in all their oozing, chittering, pulsating and bursting horror – are the focus of this new expansion to *StarCraft II*. Which raises the question: why on Earth would anyone want to play a whole 20-mission singleplayer campaign as the Zerg? Especially when it follows the down-home grit of the Western-tinged first episode, *Wings Of Liberty*, which focused on the adventures of Jim Raynor and his gang of rebel Raiders as they faced up to the despotic reign of Emperor Mengsk.

Blizzard's answer is Kerrigan. Once a Terran – which is to say human – and even Raynor's lover, Mengsk allowed her to be captured and infested by the Zerg all the way back in the original *StarCraft*. She then became the Queen Of Blades, the powerful psionic leader of the Zerg swarm. At the end of *Wings Of Liberty*, Raynor mostly restores her humanity, although she has other ideas about her fate. *Heart Of The Swarm*'s campaign follows her quest to reunite the Zerg swarm, which broke apart after her departure, and exact her revenge on Mengsk.

Blizzard has a knack for establishing personality-led stories that span epic conflicts in its unashamedly conventional fantasy and science fiction worlds, and *Heart Of The Swarm* continues the tradition. It also contrives to give the Zerg a human face and disposition, since Kerrigan, like you, is a little taken aback by just how grotesque they are as she leads them, uninfested and conscious, from a vast, living spaceship called the Leviathan. Take her relationship with Abathur, a brutally practical geneticist with spidery limbs, plus a mouth lined with mandibles and seeping with goo. He initially tries to evolve Kerrigan until she threatens to hit him with a psionic blast, and she has to forbid him from experimenting on humans.





BELOW **Protoss Tempests face Zerg Vipers, the long-range energy blasts of the former able to do bonus damage to flying targets. Vipers, however, have the ability to grab units and pull them towards themselves, which is always a crowd-pleaser**

The main visual change is greater use of physics when units are destroyed. This includes ragdoll simulation, which leads to, say, Marines cartwheeling through the air after an Ultralisk's powerful charge





Abathur's relentlessly logical responses to what he views as Kerrigan's weak human morality provide an unexpected form of comic relief to her somewhat dour presence in the cutscenes. After all, Kerrigan lives only to finish Mengsk, and she struggles with the nature of the acts she commits. When she captures a Protoss soldier, she has to stop her advisors from dissecting it, explaining that true leaders "only use violence as a tool". That, she's told, is a very Terran way of thinking.

She also portentously examines blame: when Kerrigan tells the Protoss soldier that if she doesn't destroy the Protoss forces, her own will die, the Protoss accuses her of being willing to kill thousands to save herself. To which Kerrigan retorts that the Protoss have killed billions of Zerg. "I'll have a lot to answer for once Mengsk is dead," she later mutters. If this sounds a little grandiloquent, don't worry: it's confined to the cutscenes.

Abathur is also the source of a special new set of missions, which unlock as the campaign unfolds. They task you with assimilating the 'essences' from various unfortunate forms of wildlife in order to improve a specific unit type, and then ask you to choose the strain with which you continue to play. With the Zergling, for instance, the Raptor strain leaps up cliffs and delivers an enhanced attack, while the Swarmling generates three Zerglings per spawn. With the Baneling, the Splitter strain divides into two smaller, less powerful Banelings after detonation, while the Hunter can leap up cliffs and spring towards enemies from a distance. The missions replace *Wings Of Liberty*'s Armory, in other words – where you could spend credits on unit upgrades – and they're also accompanied by choosing abilities for Kerrigan as she levels up.

Kerrigan occupies a far greater role in the game than Raynor in *Wings Of Liberty*, which saw him mostly consigned to cutscenes. Kerrigan, instead, is a fully functional unit in her own right, appearing in most story missions. She has her own, very high health, energy, damage and armour stats, which increase as she levels, and they're displayed in the top-right corner of the screen. If she dies, she respawns back at your base after a short delay. Her array of special abilities, which are powerful enough to turn a battle around, are reminiscent of those of a *DOTA* hero, in that they cost energy and are mapped to similar keys on the keyboard. Q unleashes Kinetic Blast, which delivers high damage to a target, while W is Crushing Grip, which stuns enemies in an area for three seconds. Later, she'll be able to immediately spawn Overlords

Kerrigan occupies a far greater role than Raynor in Wings Of Liberty

or have killed Zerglings respawn at her base at no resource cost. And once she reaches level 60, she can choose either to drop large Zerg armies at specific locations or spawn a Leviathan ship to thunder across the map.

"Kerrigan should be the centre," explains art director **Sam Didier**. "That's why we went with a hero mechanic with this one. We wanted you to evolve her along with her army.



Level best

Though many of *Heart Of The Swarm*'s additions are aimed at newcomers, high-level *StarCraft II* players are also being catered for. For instance, the game will find matches with geographically local players – handy for housemates. Screencasters will be able to customise the replay UI, and *Heart Of The Swarm* provides new performance statistics. It will resume games unexpectedly cut off, and rewards players as they level up via the new XP system with decals, used to decorate home bases; portraits; and new unit skins. Finally, it introduces new social structures – clans and groups – for competitive teams and socialising, respectively.



ABOVE **Protoss Oracles have a powerful air-to-ground attack that can make short work of enemy worker units, crushing a foe's economy**

Raynor couldn't just, you know, bench press 500lb, but Kerrigan can suddenly have a sonic blast or summon Banelings around her. It felt more personal and mighty with her. The hero mechanic is something we wanted to make different about this game."

The result is something akin to *WarCraft III*, which introduced the idea of hero units operating alongside regular ones to Blizzard's RTSes, adding more action to the strategy. Kerrigan's power is more than enough to make up for the extra management overhead, helping even the odds against larger armies.

The main campaign missions themselves continue from the template set by *Wings Of Liberty*. An early mission has the swarm settling a frozen planet, Kal'dir, in order to assimilate the forces of an isolated Brood Mother. The trouble is there's a significant Protoss presence here, too, which might warn the main fleet of Kerrigan's return. The aim, therefore, is to destroy three psionic spires to stop communications between Kal'dir and the main fleet, but the Protoss are far more numerous than the Zerg. What's more, the planet has periods of flash freezes, which for a minute solidify everything other than native lifeforms like ursadon (which are exactly what you'd divine from the name: a cross between a bear and a mastodon). Enter the Zerg's flexible approach to genetics: by ingesting the essence of an ursadon, they become immune to the flash freezes.

Thus the stage is set for a rhythmic pattern of push and retreat as you wait for the flash freezes to neutralise the heavily fortified Protoss forces, roll in to destroy as much as you can, and then pull back to defend your base from counterattacks when they thaw. It's a fun riff on *Wings Of Liberty*'s excellent Outbreak mission, where by day you would destroy Zerg-infested buildings and by night faced attacks from infested humans. But a faster tempo gives it a fresh feel.

Similarly, Shoot The Messenger is an adaptation of *Wings Of Liberty*'s Great Train Robbery mission. It asks that you destroy eight waves of Protoss shuttles before they reach hyperspace jump points, while also



www.bit.ly/WLR3XL
Screenshot gallery



negotiating various enemy outposts as your forces cross the map to meet the shuttles' paths. Like most *StarCraft* missions, it introduces a specific unit that's ideal for the scenario – in this case, the ground-to-air-capable Hydralisk – while also underlining the need to look after your base, maintain resource gathering and produce units, all while carrying out attacks in the field.

Heart Of The Swarm's campaign diverges from this pattern in the next mission, Enemy Within, however. It's time to infest and control the Protoss' capital ship with the help of a parasitic larva that can ingest biomass from the ship's stock of scientific specimens. As you progress along its linear path, there's some light stealth play as you avoid Protoss Zealots and eat enough to transform into a Queen, which can breed a set number of Zerglings, Roaches and Banelings. It happily nods to Aliens, too; you find a safe, warm place to grow and send Zerglings into vents too narrow for your Queen to access. Ingest more mass and you can breed more minions, until by the end you're involved in large skirmishes with the ship's desperate crew. On Hard difficulty, you'll be engaged in cat-and-mouse play as you push your Zerglings into enemies and then back again, keeping your Queen out of the line of fire.

The big question over *StarCraft II*'s campaign has always been about whether it can successfully bring players into the realms of multiplayer, which is where the meat of the game lies. Many players only come for the campaign, though, well aware of how tough multiplayer is, knowing it demands deep strategic knowledge as well as fearsome manual and mental dexterity. "We had a lot of players who didn't want to play multiplayer because it's too competitive, or because of the ladders – they'd lose and drop down," admits Didier, acknowledging *Wings Of Liberty*'s notorious 'ladder anxiety'. And there wasn't much tutoring to understand how multiplayer works either: "The singleplayer campaign teaches you how to play the singleplayer campaign, but not really multiplayer."

And so *Heart Of The Swarm* has a raft of features designed to pull new players, and more experienced ones who would otherwise leave the game after finishing the campaign, into multiplayer. Some are simple: the matchmaking screen reduces the emphasis on ranked matches, relegating them to the button on the furthest right in favour of buttons leading to matches against AI enemies, unranked matches and the new dedicated training mode. "It has been a focus for a lot of the team asking what would be fun in training [missions]. You don't want them to be a bore, so they have to be entertaining as well as teach you some things," says Didier.

The AI matches will be pitched at your current level, meanwhile, so you're constantly being tested to support your personal improvement. And if you play with a co-op AI, it will tell you through the chat interface about its plans – when it's pushing, or when it needs support – to give you more insight into overall strategy. Further knowledge can be gleaned from watching replays, and in *Heart Of The Swarm* you can do so with friends, even using the Take Command feature to start playing yourself from any given point.

Heart Of The Swarm has a raft of features designed to pull players into multiplayer

Such additions and tweaks are sweeping – perhaps the subtlest we noticed was that the keyboard shortcut for each ability and build order is now clearly displayed in the battle UI's button, rather than on its tooltip – and should do much to help continue *StarCraft's* growth as a competitive game. It's especially key in the face of the continued popularity of *League Of Legends* and *Dota 2*.

But there's still the sense that *StarCraft II* is two individual games in one package. As production director **Chris Sigaty** sums up, "Players are coming for the cinematics and the story." Moreover, fun features such as making Kerrigan playable only pulls the singleplayer campaign away from the formal nature of multiplayer. "When we're making this game," explains Didier, "we're making it for two groups, and that's one of the difficult things – we've got to make sure each half of this game is a full game for those people."

Q&A
Sam Didier
Art director, Blizzard



What are the Zerg like to design compared to other races?
They're one of the easiest races, because they have a central theme about them, and it's always teeth and claws and nails and fangs. You could almost say: eight legs, two heads, breathe fire and fly – boom! Everything fits with the Zerg, because they're so adaptable.

Given that looseness, how do you imply units' capabilities?
One of the units I'm most proud of is the Swarm Host, because you see on its back what it does – little eggs bubbling, so you know something bad is coming from there. It's also a unit that particularly creeps people out; they don't like its back, with those pulsing holes, and get grossed out. I think, 'Fantastic, we've done our job.'

Do you think there's ever a chance that you might put players off wanting to play the game as the Zerg?
You could make them a big pool of blood and eyeballs and guts, but that's not cool. You still have to have that cool factor, where people say they either want to play that or fight it. I think we have a lot of choices – say if people really are completely disgusted by the Zerg, they can still play Protoss or Terran.

How do you go about introducing new units to the races?
There are a couple of ways. We ask what we want to do with the Zerg, and say they don't really have a siege mechanic – that's when design comes to us. We start coming up with cool ideas about what would represent that, like our Swarm Host, a big, fat wobbly unit. You don't see it running in and tearing things apart. But there are other units, like the Terran's Thor. We just wanted a big, badass robot. Poor Dustin [Browder, lead designer] was like, "We don't really need that." And we were like, "It'd be cool though, right?" That's an example of art pushing, and the other is design pushing it. We go 50-50.

In the face of art-driven and design-driven ideas, which usually tends to take precedence?
It's mostly about gameplay. It's about what the units do that makes them cool. Then you can put awesome art on top of that. Then there are also times we just want an Ultralisk, a big, badass Zerg monster that just runs in and chops the hell out of things. There is gameplay to it, but mostly it's a big monster [that] I get to play with.



BELOW (FROM TOP) **The Terrans' two new units are the Widow Mine, which can hop onto both ground and air units to destroy them; and the Hellion's new battle mode, boosting its attack**







ABOVE **Kerrigan appears dressed in her Ghost outfit for the early part of the campaign, but we wonder whether she'll end up regressing to her infested Queen Of Blades state later**







ABOVE (FROM TOP) **The Protoss have the most new units: the long-range flying Tempest; the Oracle, an air-to-ground specialist; and Mothership Cores, which can recall units from across the map to take them out of danger**

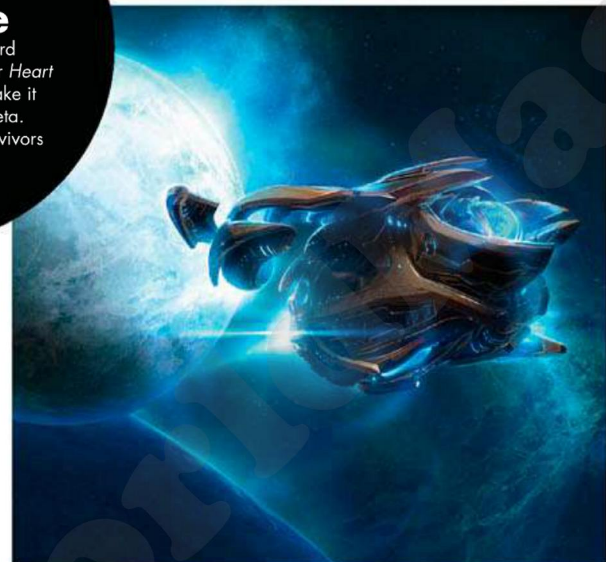
Design showcase

Many of the units Blizzard originally announced for *Heart Of The Swarm* didn't make it through the rigours of beta. Here are the rugged survivors





ABOVE (FROM LEFT) **The new Zerg units are the Swarm Host, a slow siege specialist that spawns ground Locust units; and the Viper, an air support unit that can pull units out of formation and reduce enemy vision range.**
LEFT AND RIGHT **You generally only see *Starcraft* from the isometric view of the game window, but in campaign cutscenes you see the landscape of each world Kerrigan visits through the mouth of her Leviathan ship**



HYPE

DUST 514

CCP's ground war finally spills onto Eve's servers

Publisher	CCP
Developer	In-house
Format	PS3
Origin	Shanghai
Release	TBC (in open beta)



Over three years and some 42 issues ago, *Dust 514* featured on the cover of **Edge** alongside the promising title "When worlds collide." The premise seemed straightforward enough: *Dust* would be a firstperson shooter that took place in *Eve*'s universe, but not as some separate spin-off, instead forming a realtime part of the Icelandic developer's Machiavellian sandbox.

It's a thrilling concept, one that evokes thoughts of console-based FPS players scrabbling for territory while starship pilots hover miles above them, with the actions in one plane having consequences in an entirely different game. Realising such ambition, however, has taken time. Even *Dust*'s lengthy closed beta didn't establish a connection between the two games. But now, as *Dust 514* enters open beta, worlds are finally colliding.

We're visiting CCP's Reykjavik HQ so that we might get blown to smithereens by the cross-game orbital bombardment feature for the first time. From the perspective of PS3-based players, orbital bombardments work much like a killstreak reward in other FPSes, although there's a hint in their strictly rationed usage that something more significant is occurring. Only squad leaders can request orbital bombardments, and even they can only do so when enough victory

RIGHT **Since the soldiers in CCP's war are all clones, it's their suits that differentiate them. A range, starting with standard assault outfits but also encompassing anti-vehicular and hacking specialists, are available**



With corporations vying for territory, space battles should naturally erupt above their land-based counterparts. Indeed, battles could be lost on the ground but decided beyond the atmosphere

points (which are doled out for fulfilling objectives) have been accrued.

CCP has rigged our demonstration so that both teams start with a bountiful supply of victory points, though the sides still act out a straightforward battle scene. One team of battle-ready clones (see 'Space opera') has captured a control point in what is essentially a Domination gametype, which is playing out on a dust-blown, desert-like map dressed with the spires of an industrial complex.

As the other team moves into attack the entrenched soldiers, the defending squad's leader opens up a chat window using the PlayStation's familiar virtual keyboard. He types two words – barely two, in fact, just "need OB" – and they appear instantaneously on a nearby *Eve* player's screen. It should feel more momentous, really, this realtime communication between participants in two different games, but the execution is seamless to the point that we instantly take it for granted, with the *Dust* player's SOS simply appearing unobtrusively alongside the other chatter on the *Eve* pilot's display.

This desperate plea from one platform to another, across a divide measured in light years, framerates and texture resolution, doesn't go unanswered. The *Eve* player fires up his vessel and speeds through the system, eventually arriving in orbit around the planet where the defending squad awaits aid. We can even see the battle as a series of flashes lighting up one of the continents, although it's mostly smoke and mirrors at this stage. If *Eve* offers events on a galactic scale and *Dust* on a more personal level, then the gap between the two – which could be filled with aerial combat, orbital reinforcements and ground-to-space retreats – remains as yet tantalisingly unfilled. In another update perhaps; today is about how a PC-based *Eve* player can ruin a *Dust* player's day.

We can even see the battle as a series of flashes lighting up one of the continents

Some coordination is needed between the gamers now, as the pilot readies his ship and the soldier signals where he wants the strike to land. The target is a fairly open spot on the edge of an industrial facility that's swarming with enemies. The leader gives the order. The pilot fires. A series of bluish-white lights bursts towards the surface of the planet.

There's a small delay before those blue dots hit the earth, except they're not dots at all from a *Dust* player's point of view. The bombardment that hits the battlefield is large enough to take out a whole squad when correctly aimed, and this bombardment has been aimed very precisely indeed – a roll call of kills appearing on the *Eve* player's screen. It's easy to see how such a display of power could turn the tide of battle. In fact, it's not hard to imagine how having an armour-plated, laser-firing guardian angel overhead could decide it, perhaps in turn drawing in other ships to contest such an advantage.

For now, orbital bombardments are the destructive point of connection between *Dust* and *Eve*, but the two games will increasingly blend over time, with *Eve*'s virtual economy slowly annexing *Dust*'s own. This could have huge implications. Currently, some of *Dust*'s upgrades and equipment are transient in nature, meaning they can be consumed or destroyed, which could prove galling to players if they were brought with real money. However, meshing the two games' economies raises the possibility that *Eve*'s corporations – massive player alliances with a vested interest in controlling planets – could pour virtual cash into *Dust*'s armies. This in turn sets up genuine potential for proxy wars and for smaller battles to be

BELOW **The gametype we played centred on hacking and capturing turrets that would fire at AI ships above. It was Domination, in effect, with the winning team being the first to destroy their foe's vessel**



turned into crucial flashpoints in galaxy-wide conflicts. And the majority of corporations have had players in *Dust*'s beta, ensuring a running start for the shooter.

CCP may well be glad of this existing incentive for *Eve*'s players to populate *Dust*'s servers, because the game itself is otherwise unexceptional. It only takes a glance at *Dust*'s expansive marketplace, with its endless lists of weapons, skills, augmentations and upgrades, to realise that loadout tweaking and class building (or 'fitting', as it's described in a piece of borrowed *Eve* jargon) will be a significant component of the final game, but during our demo all we have the chance to explore is its merits as a shooter.

And it's a serviceable one, although sadly for CCP, *PlanetSide 2* has outflanked its game by offering a similar sci-fi flavoured forever-war on a technically lesser but certainly more appreciable scale. There's no USP or novel mechanic for *Dust* to hang its guns on, either, just solid shooting in functional locales.

But that may not even matter. Because *Dust*'s true potential lies not in the game itself, but in the vast universe beyond it, where the most minor skirmish can take on system-wide import. And beyond that, it lies on the message boards and in the chat rooms where *Eve*'s infamous alliances are broken and formed. *Dust*, whether *Eve*'s playerbase decides to welcome its inclusion or not, is now a part of their infamous player-authored, universe-spanning dramas. ■

Dust's true potential lies not in the game itself, but in the vast universe beyond it



Space opera

Integrating *Dust* into *Eve*'s universe might have been a technical challenge, but *Eve*'s lore was more than ready to find space for endless, ongoing ground wars. With cloning already an integral part of *Eve*'s fiction, it's simply taken the advent of cheap cloning technology to trigger *Dust*'s pitched infantry battles, a fact that also means each death in the shooter is (technically, at least) permanent, with equipment potentially lost even if your character's consciousness and experience is retained. Respawns might be a foundational part of multiplayer shooter design, but it's still nice to play something where their presence is explained.

Q&A

Kristoffer Touborg

Lead game designer for *Eve Online*, CCP



Have there been any difficult compromises that you've had to make when trying to join the two universes together?

The economy. We want people to be able to freely move money between the two games, but the fact that *Eve* has been established to be an economy where some people have saved vast amounts of wealth and *Dust* is just starting off makes that incredibly difficult to plan. So for that one we're kind of having a bit of a balance walk now, where during the beta it's going to be switched off, and once we get a better feel for the disparities between the two games we'll be able to open *Dust* up to *Eve*. So the economy's one. I also think that the practical ways that the two games influence each other have to be designed in [such a] way that the players appreciate that they're part of the same thing and don't hate each other. And that's the other big challenge. And then there's the whole technical thing, which has been immensely difficult, but our engineers have done a really awesome job of doing.

A lot of *Eve* is about interactions between players, a lot of which happens in forums outside of the game. How has *Dust* been designed to encourage this kind of drama and intrigue?

The interaction is designed in a collaborative way, so it's not *Eve* players versus *Dust* players. It's player communities that happen to have ground forces and air forces. So it's not designed for the two playerbases to conflict, it's designed to be two distinct games for a community to play against one another. So I think that's very important: we're not just designing one game to fuck over another game.

How important will the land battles be in the context of the *Eve* universe? Will there be resources or other rewards available to factions that take planets via *Dust*?

Our initial link will be simply faction warfare [through which factions claim sovereignty over *Eve* systems], though we're hoping to go into the more sandboxy high-end gameplay. The initial thing is factional warfare. You can completely ignore the *Dust* mercenaries, but that'll make factional warfare considerably harder. The idea is that planetary control in a system you own is important. If you're in a system, you want to own all the planets. Otherwise, it becomes a fairly weak system you have a loose grasp on. If you're, on the other hand, trying to invade a system, you want to own the planets beforehand so that it's easier for you to come in.

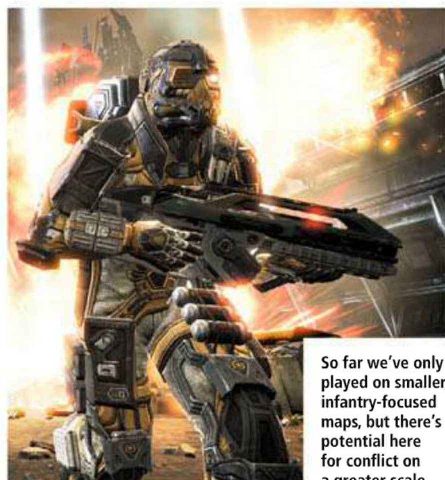
Vehicles are expensive, and it's entirely possible to save up for a dropship only to destroy it on your first go. As the economies entwine, however, expect to see *Eve* corporations footing the supply bill



The list of features yet to be introduced dwarves those it debuts with. Trailers hint at a PvE component, with humans facing off against what appear to be automated drones



There's a prefab industrial feel to the map we play. With CCP promising maps for every planet, we expect to see similar geometry replicated across many worlds



So far we've only played on smaller, infantry-focused maps, but there's potential here for conflict on a greater scale



Space-land interactions are strictly one way right now, but updates should eventually give *Dust* players the ability to fire back upon ships in *Eve*

Lightning was voted the most popular female character in the series by the official Japanese *Final Fantasy* Facebook group, beating *VII*'s Aeris and *X*'s Yuna. So it's not hard to see why she's back again

HYPE

LIGHTNING RETURNS: FINAL FANTASY XIII

With time running out for Lightning, Square Enix switches tack

Publisher	Square Enix
Developer	In-house
Format	360, PS3
Origin	Japan
Release	Autumn 2013



ABOVE **Having only one playable character quickens the pace of battles, and that's not the only change to combat – gone are the menus, replaced with a more action-orientated system tied to the face buttons**

The city of Luxerion is a stark contrast to the tight corridors of *Final Fantasy XIII*. Crowds of NPCs wander the streets, and Lightning – back once more in the hands of players – is able to explore these paths freely. There's a day/night cycle, sidequests to pick up and roaming monsters to battle. It's the rich, dynamic space that's been sorely missing from an increasingly static series.

The architecture is ornate, classical and reminiscent of the sun-washed stone of *Assassin's Creed*'s Renaissance Italy – and the similarities don't end with the setting. Lightning is on the trail of a secretive cult, and we see snippets of her investigation, such as tailing hooded figures through winding streets and climbing rooftops. Square Enix says that quests will offer a variety of gameplay types to supplement the series' trademark Active Time Battles.

In one example, Lightning must discover a numerical code in order to access the cult's headquarters. The digits are hidden around Luxerion, scribbled on walls in hard-to-reach places. To form the password, she has to explore the city, collect the numbers and then piece them together in the correct order. Such variations in pace and quest structure should stop this game feeling like a procession of battles linked by lengthy cutscenes.

The majority of our demo is spent in Luxerion, but we do get some glimpses of other environments. In the Dead Dunes, we see Lightning sliding down banks of sand and exploring ancient ruins, echoing *Journey*. The Wildlands are home to lush forests and small towns filled with quest-giving villagers. Each island will offer a different style of quest, and Square Enix boldly claims that some of these isles are so large you can get lost in them.

Wherever you go, Lightning is the protagonist. The reason behind this, director

Luxerion is the dynamic space that's been missing from an increasingly static series

Motomu Toriyama explains, is that there's never been a strong lead female in the series before (he doesn't count Terra). Lightning's visually striking, sure, especially in her ostentatious new costumes, but her sullen demeanour – many have called her *FFXIII*'s answer to *VII*'s brooding Cloud Strife – doesn't make for the most charismatic lead.

Like any *Final Fantasy* hero worth their salt, Lightning's on a quest to save the world. The twist here is that she only has 13 days to do it. Throughout the game, a timer keeps you



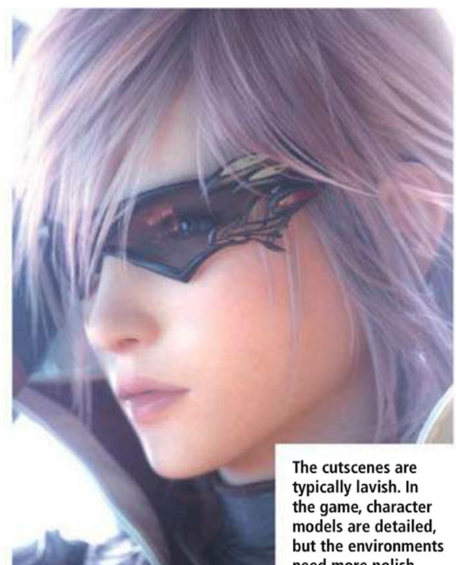
LIGHTNING RETURNS: FINAL FANTASY XIII



The way that Lightning darts around her enemies in combat makes the battles feel different to those in other *FF* games. We just hope it doesn't end up feeling shallow after a few hours of play

BELOW **As well as new characters – such as this mystery girl – familiar faces return to help Lightning, including Hope and Snow**





The cutscenes are typically lavish. In the game, character models are detailed, but the environments need more polish

informed about how many days remain before the apocalypse. It's difficult not to think of *Majora's Mask*, although it seems Lightning won't be able to manipulate time in the way Link did. Clocks are dotted around the environment, serving as a constant reminder that you're battling against minutes as well as monsters. Many quests can only be picked up or completed at night, and some NPCs only appear at set points in the day.

Time management is going to be crucial to success in this game. Travelling between the four islands will take several in-game hours, and quests have time penalties. The reward for a given quest may be great, but it will use up more time, so you'll have to decide whether it's worth the increased risk. The idea is that the game is designed to be played through multiple times, which is another *Final Fantasy* first. There's no way to complete every sidequest in a single playthrough, so you'll have to go back through the story more than once in order to see them all.

As in *XIII-2*, battles take place on a separate screen, although you're no longer tethered to the ground, moving Lightning around with the left stick, much as in *Ni No Kuni*. Abilities and magic are mapped to the face buttons, rather than accessed through the usual menus, giving the battles the immediacy of an action game. It's a dramatic departure for the series, although it runs the risk of being overly simple.

Abilities and magic are mapped to face buttons, not accessed through menus

It's in Lightning's costumes that the strategy may potentially lie, acting as an alternative to the Paradigm Shift system. Each of her so-called 'Garbs' brings with it a selection of powers, and you can switch between them in battle with the shoulder buttons. The outfits are comically flamboyant, even for a *Final Fantasy* game, all billowing silk, ornate metalwork and leather chaps. Each also represents a different class; enemies will be weak against some and resistant to others, and knowing which to choose – and when – forms the meat of the combat.

Three large ATB bars dominate the HUD, showing you the status of the three costumes you have to choose from and when they're available to equip. Lightning's loadout can be further augmented with swords and shields, which share the same extravagant designs as her outfits. Garbs may be customised, so you



Last of the line

Lightning Returns represents the end of the *Final Fantasy XIII* trilogy, although Square Enix says there could yet be other games set within its universe, so it's hardly a closed door. Lightning herself was relegated to a supporting role during *Final Fantasy XIII-2*, and at the end of that game she was placed in stasis. Having taken a 500-year slumber, she's been awakened for the events of *Lightning Returns* by the god Bhunivelze, and tasked with shepherding the citizens of Nova Crystallis to safety ahead of an impending apocalypse. Although it's a standalone story, knowledge of its predecessors will help a great deal.

BELOW **Each costume has its own distinct set of powers, but old-school *FF* spells – Blizzard, Fire, Thunder and so on – return, and can be custom-fitted to your Garbs**

can have, say, one dedicated to healing and another set up for elemental magic. The system doesn't look that deep as yet, but it does seem to bestow some freedom on the player to create bespoke builds to suit different situations.

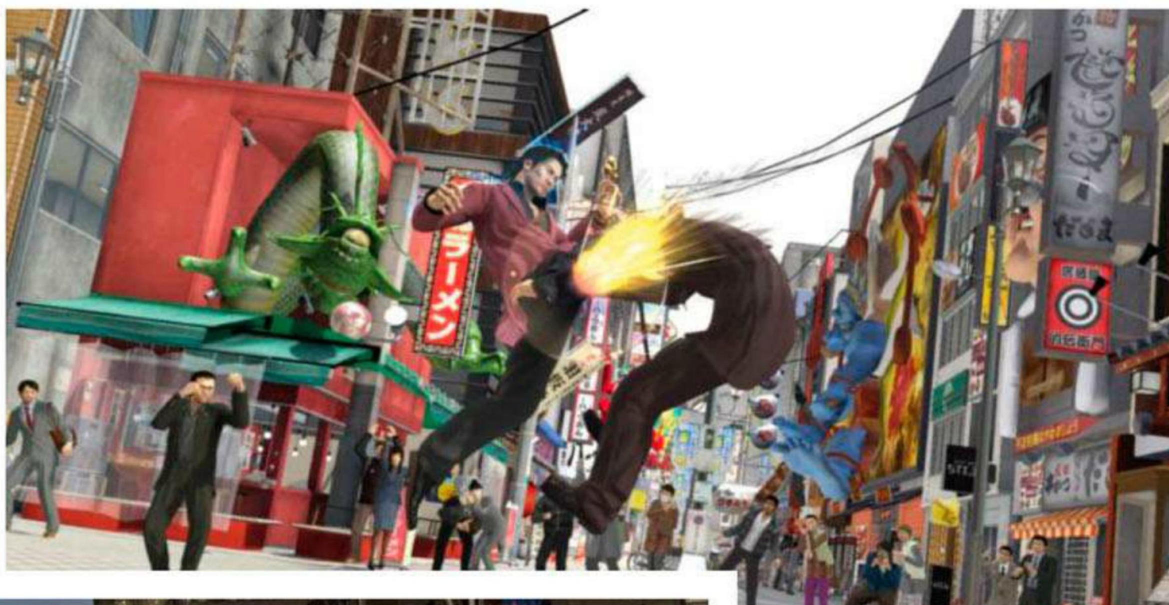
As well as smaller monsters running wild on the streets of Luxerion, we were treated to a larger battle with a behemoth. Lightning spots the creature stampeding down an alley and approaches it from behind, with a damage bonus awarded from the resulting backstab. The battle screen swirls into view and Lightning circles the beast, pummelling it with familiar *Final Fantasy* spells. During the fight, she staggers her opponent with a knockdown effect, giving her a few seconds to attack without fear of reprisal. Square Enix makes a point of telling us that all the spell and combat effects are new, and that little has been recycled from the previous two games.

Our biggest concern is that *Lightning Returns* borrows so much else from other games that it lacks an identity of its own, while *Final Fantasy* traditionalists may well lament the loss of menus and the dramatic shift in combat direction. The Crystal Tools engine is also beginning to show its age. The character models are typically beautiful, but they jar against the flat, grubby environment textures. A cutscene shows a clock close-up, and the numbers on its face are a blur. The exquisite detailing of the character models clearly comes at a cost. Still, it's heartening to see Square Enix trying something different with *Lightning Returns*, and, with its busy and open cities, build on *XIII-2*'s attempts to address complaints about the linearity of the first game.



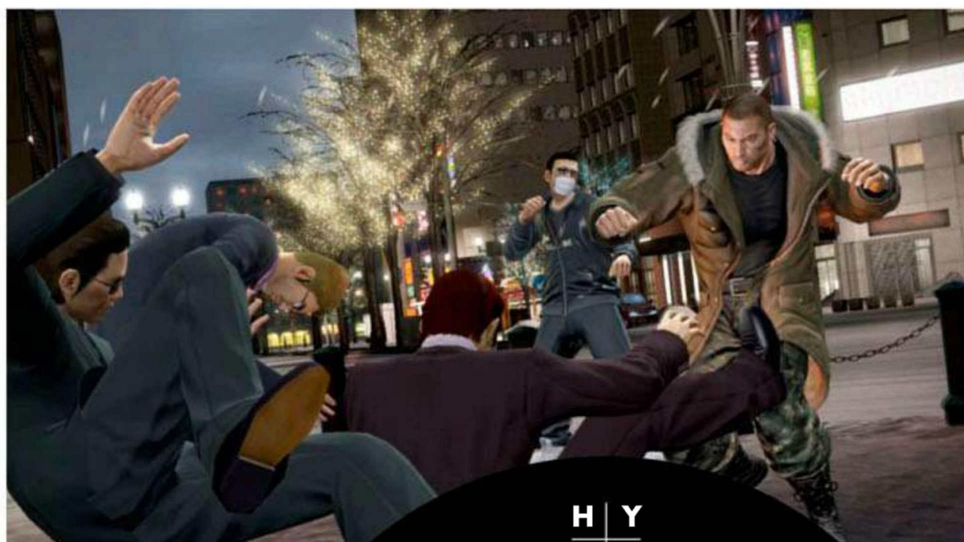
www./bit.ly/WuJ9El
Screenshot gallery





BELOW **Chain together a string of moves without reply and you'll soon find your enemies retreating in fear. Chasing these whimpering cowards down proves a troublingly intoxicating power fantasy**

The context-sensitive finishers are as diverse as ever. With good timing, you can make Akiyama kick one airborne enemy directly into another





The narrative takes place against the usual backdrop of clan violence, with Kazuma caught, as ever, in the middle – most notably in an astonishing chapter-closing brawl

HYPE

YAKUZA 5

Five cities, eight fists, and lots of reasons to want a western release

Publisher	Sega
Developer	In-house
Format	PS3
Origin	Japan
Release	Out now (JP), TBC (EU/US)

We've often heard the *Yakuza* games described as Japan's answer to *GTA*. Such comparisons are generally lazy: the two series share little in common beyond narratives that offer a glimpse at a criminal lifestyle and tonal oscillations between the serious and the silly. So it's a surprise to find producer Toshihiro Nagoshi inviting the comparison, likening *Yakuza 5* to *GTA: San Andreas*. Having spent over 50 hours with the Japanese-language edition, however, we'd probably agree with his choice of comparison: as with Rockstar's opus, this is perhaps the apotheosis of the series so far, a game of extraordinary volume and generosity.

There are five cities to explore, for starters, and the fictional suburbs of Fukuoka, Sapporo, Osaka and Nagoya are rendered with a similar attention to authenticity as the series' familiar corner of Tokyo, Kamurocho. In truth, none of these new cities are as intricate or as dense as the old one, and a few are aggressively gated, with huge invisible barriers preventing you from crossing certain roads in Sapporo, for example. While it's impossible to escape the staples of Club Sega, M Stores and the Don Quixote jingle wherever you go, each area has signature features, from Sapporo's towering ice sculptures to Osaka's wooden piers and takoyaki stands.

Nagoshi described development of the game as "like building a new house", but it's one constructed on established foundations. Structurally, this game is identical to *Yakuza 4*, with four separate narrative threads that entwine in a final chapter, not to mention a similar fight-cutscene-fight flow. A new game engine makes transitions between the two less jarring, though, and moves from exploration to street fighting have been streamlined, too. When accosted by a thug, you have but a few seconds to ready yourself for combat, and then you're thrown into the fray.

Once battle commences, there are a few notable changes. It's by no means *Bayonetta* or *Ninja Gaiden*, but there's a greater fluidity to combos, and you're granted access to better moves earlier on. Subtle tweaks to the movesets make the four characters distinctive: it's much easier to tell loan shark Shun Akiyama and lead Kazuma Kiryu apart now, the former barely bothering to use his fists. Saejima Taiga, a powerful but sluggish brute in *Yakuza 4*, is far more fun to play as well.

Each of the game's stars has an additional Climax Heat move, too, an extra-powerful attack that drains the familiar Heat meter (built up through regular combat) entirely.

There's a greater fluidity to combos, and you're granted access to better moves earlier

Washed-up baseball star Tatsuo Shinada charges into opponents, stunning them if their momentum takes them into a wall or solid object; Kazuma can pick up an enemy by his foot, spinning him around to trip nearby goons; and Akiyama launches a series of airborne kicks that would put Ryu and Ken to shame. The standard Heat moves have ratcheted up in brutality, too. *Yakuza*'s violence has always had a cartoonish edge, but some of the attacks here are vicious enough to make you wince. Even the likeable Akiyama stamps on heads, while noses are regularly crushed against walls and shop fronts.

The most significant break from tradition comes in the third chapter, in which Kazuma's adopted daughter, Haruka, trains to become an idol in Osaka. The rhythm-action sequences that pitch you against a more experienced duo are very easy, although in that regard it's much like *Yakuza*'s fights: it's all about winning with style. Street brawls are replaced with dance battles, and the upbeat J-Pop numbers you tap along to will quickly burrow into your brain and take up residence.

Beyond that, Nagoshi seems unwilling to upset the status quo, though it's easy to see why, surrounded as *Yakuza* is by legions of long-lived game series in which differences between entries are minor. Besides, strong launch-week sales are essential to offset the costs of an expensive voice cast and the evident effort expended on its two-year development. *Yakuza*'s formula sells, so there's little pressure to deviate.

However, it's a formula that only sells in Japan, which explains why Sega, currently focusing its attention on big franchises and mobile partnerships in the face of financial troubles, has been reluctant to announce a western release. With that in mind, an import purchase is all the more tempting, though we'd advise against it unless you're fluent in Japanese. This is, after all, a series driven by the stories it tells, often through long conversations between two characters.

Much of *Yakuza*'s appeal comes from the fact that, behind the crunching violence, its moral compass is pointing firmly in the right direction. With every nose broken, a new lesson is taught. Yes, characters might need to take a beating before learning the error of their ways, but almost everyone becomes a better person as a result of your pugilistic interventions. Persistent mission markers and simple objectives make it an easy game to muddle through, sure, but take away *Yakuza*'s narrative and you lose its heart, and the slightly clunky nature of its not-quite-open sandbox is exposed.

So 50 hours in and we're still itching to return to Kamurocho, even though we can't help but wish we were playing this in English. Over here, *Yakuza* might be a cult hit at best, but this is surely too good a renovation to ignore. Nagoshi's housewarming is in full swing in Japan, and it's high time the rest of the world gatecrashed the party. ■



A lot on the side

It's all but impossible to not get drawn in by one of *Yakuza 5*'s bewildering array of distractions. Club Sega has a new UFO Catcher joining its playable *Taiko No Tatsujin* and *Virtua Fighter 2* cabinets, while chrome-coated shooter *Boxcelios* has been replaced by the equally shiny *GunRhein*. Saejima can participate in a snowball fight, while Kazuma's new role as a taxi driver tasks him with ferrying customers around Fukuoka and taking on boy racers in a series of Heat-powered pursuits. Our pick of the asides is Saejima's range of surprisingly tense hunting missions, which bring about the return of a familiar ursine opponent.

3DS's lack of a second analogue stick means that vertical aiming is mapped to buttons or light gyroscopic tilts. The latter are well implemented and soon become second nature

HYPE

LUIGI'S MANSION 2

We spend the night in one of Luigi's new haunted houses

Publisher	Nintendo
Developer	Next Level Games
Format	3DS
Origin	Canada
Release	March 2013

There are cash prizes for wrangling multiple ghosts at once, although it does require a perfectly timed and aimed blast of strobe light. When Luigi is locked on, a new evasive move helps him avoid breaking the stream



Luigi's Mansion 2 (AKA *Dark Moon* in North America) is the game 3DS was born to play, or so Nintendo would have us believe. As revealed in an Iwata Asks session with original *Luigi's Mansion* director Hideki Konno, the handheld owes a debt to his prototype for a stereoscopic LCD add-on for GameCube, which was paired with a 3D version of his spook-hunting game.

Entering the first of five new mansions, Ghastly Manor, it's easy to see the attraction of marrying this series with 3D. The game is viewed in cross section, and pushing up the 3DS's depth slider sees rooms sink back into the murk, offering the sense of peeking into a peculiarly Gothic dollhouse. Combined with subtle gyroscope use to gently tilt the rooms, it rekindles 3DS's initial capacity to wow.

This is a smart handheld update in many ways. The loss of GameCube's second analogue stick – used to aim Luigi's torch – has been counteracted by giving combat an arcade-like punch. Luigi now exposes spectres' vulnerable hearts with a strobe light; the longer you charge, the wider the area of attack, drumming up nice risk/reward tension during busier encounters. And while reeling in ghosts with the Poltergust 5000 is still a tug of war, there's a new Tension gauge in play, which enhances the first game's trick of yanking in the opposite direction to a spook to get a burst of power and a better reward.

Ghost encounters become fast and furious for it, though some players might miss the more cerebral encounters with the first game's portrait ghosts. But while there are fewer standout characters, the general foot soldiers have been injected with as much life as ghosts can have. Some hide in the furniture, giving themselves away with a drawer-rattling giggle. Others negate Luigi's strobe with sunglasses that must be sucked from their faces. Some even build makeshift armour from pots and pans, and stripping them bare litters the floor with culinary debris that can become lodged in the Poltergust's nozzle. In short, combat is two parts punching to one part punchline.

While reeling in ghosts is still a tug of war, there's a new Tension gauge in play

Slapstick comedy appears throughout the early missions, and the game's elongated development time (it was first announced for early 2012) can be explained by the volume of animations needed to put Luigi through the wringer. His early reluctance to go adventuring – he's kidnapped through his TV in a nod to Poltergeist – is well justified by the bruising quest that follows: taps explode over him, folding beds catapult him around, and he often falls down chimneys. Not since Home Alone have so many domestic trappings conspired against one intruder.

Damage taken goes towards an end-of-level grade, a new system that complements a bittier mission structure made for portable play. Luigi is free to roam the mansions, or at least go as far as gear gating will allow him at any given time, but story-driven objectives shepherd him down certain paths. In four subsequent visits to Ghastly Manor, we're asked to retrieve a new weapon, pursue six thuggish ghosts, play detective using our flashlight to follow ectoplasmic footprints and tackle a miniboss. Subtle handholding leads you to new crannies without feeling too linear; it's a *Metroid* for those on the go.

The five mansions are smaller than the first game's single domicile, but they're furnished with diversions. A wealth of interactive elements encourages you to cast Luigi's nozzle over everything, if only to watch paintings and spice racks spasm. Treasure hunting requires more care: stripping wallpaper with a slurp, rolling up rugs with a puff, or blowing ceiling fans so they rain down cash. Hoovering up every last banknote tickles the same part of the brain as the *Lego* games' studs, but with satisfaction of solving a proper puzzle to get there.

As the demo progresses, the series *Luigi's Mansion 2* most resembles is *Zelda*. Not in scale, but in the way our hero is asked to push a relatively simple item to ever further logical extremes. In just a slim selection of missions, his vacuum acts as fire starter, missile launcher, carpet yanker, fuse lighter and even a simple cleaning device. If combat threatens to be slightly more forgettable than before, this new puzzling bent could easily take up the slack. A lot depends on what cleverness, or not, awaits in the other four mansions. ■



CSI: Mushroom Kingdom

Early on, Luigi arms himself with a darklight lens. While the normal bulb freezes ghosts, this dark beam brings inanimate objects to life and can reveal any scenery hidden under the veil of illusion, causing the deceptive magic to manifest as burning orbs of blue fire. Suck these orbs up and the object becomes visible again. The darklight can also track ghostly goings on, revealing trails of spectral footprints through a graveyard or the smoky scent trail of a Boo to follow. Taken alone, it's pretty straightforward stuff, but the puzzles quickly intensify as Next Level weave it in with your Poltergust and strobe light.

HYPE

SIMCITY

Fathoming the depths of Maxis' city builder

Publisher	EA
Developer	Maxis
Format	Mac, PC
Origin	US
Release	March 5 (US), 7 (JP), 8 (EU)





The sense of a world in miniature has been perfected in *SimCity*, with tiny cars and pedestrians adding bustling life to all the glass, brick and steel spires

ABOVE **With too little room to specialise in everything, you'll need to choose. Will you be a tourist destination, police state, or even a tax haven?**
RIGHT **You can trigger disasters like this meteor shower at any point. You might recognize the Godzilla-like lizard monster from *Spore***



Where 2003's *SimCity 4* at times felt more like a job than a game, *SimCity* aims to cut back the red tape and deliver a purer hit of fun. That isn't to say it's shallow, though; a masterful series of checks and balances sit beneath the charming tilt-shift visuals to prevent the town planning sim from collapsing under its own heft.

As is customary, your city starts out as a slab of land, but that now sits in a region. You may pick an atoll fit for two cities or a great plain capable of supporting up to 16, but you can think of all the regions as online lobbies. Set yours to private and you can play solo; make it public and other players might become your neighbours.

That's neighbours, not competitors. City areas never yield a full set of resources – which include oil, coal, water and ore – but you can trade your surplus goods with neighbours for extra money, or vice versa. All you need to do is establish a truck depot, ship yard or airport. Moreover, your citizens can commute to work in nearby towns; other cities therefore help rather than hinder you, which is something the series has been building towards since *SimCity 3000*.

The core game trades on the same balancing act introduced back in 1989. Zoning land as industrial, commercial and residential districts creates interoperating sectors: a workforce, jobs and an economy. You'll need to respond to market demand and specific needs as your metropolis matures, with health, crime, education, infrastructure and recreation your responsibility. Thankfully, the task is made manageable by clear execution. Icons for basic living needs, such as water, power, waste disposal and sewage, populate a menu tray, the main display only relaying critical information. Lay waste pipes too close to suburbs, for instance, and happiness will plummet, signified by the appearance of a sea of hovering red faces above houses.



Actions have consequences. Fail to allocate enough classrooms and uneducated thugs turn criminal. They can be rehabilitated with jail time

Elsewhere, the interface uses familiar forms to be intuitive. A power station's output is denoted by a simple megawatt dial. Every amenity has an on/off switch to allow you to halt production when you need to save money. Erect a waste processing plant and you'll see brown circles start to make their way to it under the roads, accompanied by a strangely satisfying gloopy sound effect.

SimCity's new engine, GlassBox, also makes cities look more alive. Each citizen has a name, occupation and mood, and you can track each one. You can check in on their commute, on the day they drive a moving van to their new digs, and on the day that home burns down. This granularity goes right down, Maxis claims, to the boxes on factory conveyor belts. What you see is what you get, the visuals an expression of raw statistics.

The nearest thing to an endgame in *SimCity* is the Great Work. Once you've fulfilled a landmark objective, such as earning a million in Simoleon currency, you can establish a lasting legacy for your region with help from your neighbours. An 'arcology' wonder will boost education for all, for instance, while constructing an international airport sends trade skyrocketing.

By this point in the game – bar disasters – you'll have outgrown your city, and it's here our main concern lies: play areas are small. The largest grid is equivalent to a mid-sized one from *SimCity 4*. Airports and train lines are particularly tight squeezes, and having to demolish an entire section because of poor prior placement is almost inevitable. It may be all part of the challenge, but it's also a prod towards multi-city play. Can't accommodate enough police? Borrow some.

More broadly, you can peruse the global markets, using online leaderboards to track supply and demand. Together with a more inviting aesthetic, being part of a persistent global community seems to be *SimCity*'s most important innovation. ■



Helping hand

It's possible for a city to become unmanageable, but the game will warn you in advance of trouble. Icons along the bottom of the screen represent departments such as waste, power and education and glow yellow or red if they need seeing to, while citizens will advise you about their needs. A fireman, for example, might ask for a new alarm to speed up response times, while a teacher can demand extra classrooms, each of which you can build onto existing structures. There are consequences for failing to heed this unobtrusive advice, however, starting with vacated lots and protests, and escalating into full-blown riots.



X (WORKING TITLE)

Publisher Nintendo | **Developer** Monolith Soft | **Format** Wii U | **Origin** Japan | **Release** TBC



Tetsuya Takahashi directed one of Wii's last hurrahs in *Xenoblade Chronicles*, and is now working on *X*, revealed at the close of a Nintendo Direct broadcast that also yielded announcements of a new 3D *Mario* and *Wind Waker HD*. At first it looks like a straight sequel with the graphical fidelity the original deserved – a manga-coiffed hero jogs across a verdant land with a vast sword over his shoulder. Then guns come out and it's a squad-based shooter. Finally, our hero reaches a mountain summit, jumps in a mech and swoops into battle, the suit later turning into a drag racer. A HD *Xenoblade* with mechs is some elevator pitch.

DIRTY BOMB

Publisher WarChest | **Developer** Splash Damage | **Format** PC | **Origin** UK | **Release** TBC (in closed alpha)



The trailer for Splash Damage's foray into free-to-play highlights the studio's track record in multiplayer shooters, though notably 2011 misfire *Brink* didn't quite live up to the heritage of *Wolfenstein: Enemy Territory* and *Quake Wars*. Alpha footage shows a pacy, close-quarters shooter set on London streets, though its class structure will need flexibility to catch the *COD* crowd's eyes. Free-to-play with no final release date, you can pay to join its closed alpha.

VELOCITY ULTRA

Publisher FuturLab | **Developer** In-house | **Format** Vita
Origin UK | **Release** May



FuturLab's masterful PS Mini was an early Vita highlight, and it's now getting a full HD makeover for Sony's handheld. Trophies and online leaderboards head the new feature list; graphical updates include new lighting effects and explosions, with Vita's horsepower ensuring a steady 60fps throughout.

DEFIANCE

Publisher Trion Worlds | **Developer** In-house | **Format** 360, PC, PS3
Origin US | **Release** April



Trion's MMO shooter will launch alongside its namesake Syfy TV show, but this is no typical tie-in: events in one will have consequences in the other. With large-scale PvE and PvP battles, it's an ambitious project for Trion Worlds, which is also branching out onto home consoles for the first time.

PIXELJUNK 1-6

Publisher Q-Games | **Developer** In-house| **Format** PC
Origin Japan | **Release** 2013



Q-Games' latest is set on a vast expanse filled with cutesy aliens, which you take back to base and then turn into soup. This is a departure from *PixelJunk's* template, with fourplayer co-op, vehicles and exploration both above and below ground – it'll also be the first *PixelJunk* to debut on PC instead of PS3.

DIVEKICK

Publisher Iron Galaxy | **Developer** One True Game Studios
Format PC, PS3, Vita | **Origin** US | **Release** Spring



Conceived by Adam Heart, editor-in-chief of fighting game website Shoryuken, *Divekick* is a parody of an entire genre and Capcom's games in particular. It's the fighting game distilled to the bare essentials – one button to jump, another for a kick – with an emphasis on strategy and mind games.

DRUNKEN ROBOT PORNOGRAPHY

Publisher Dejobaan Games | **Developer** In-house | **Format** PC
Origin US | **Release** 2013



The new game from *AaaaaAAaaaAAAaaAAAAaAAAAA!!!* studio Dejobaan is more bullet hell firstperson platformer than FPS, pitting jetpack-sporting humans against hulking robotic titans. The jetpack-powered jump recalls *Jumping Flash!*, while a level editor lets players craft their own stages.

PROJECT X ZONE

Publisher Namco Bandai | **Developer** Monolith Soft, Banpresto
Format 3DS | **Origin** Japan | **Release** Summer



The most surprising news of the month is that this 3DS strategy-RPG-cum-fighting game is heading west. Some of the most famous faces to be found in Namco, Capcom and Sega's star-strewn IP portfolios pair up and head into battle with a focus on juggle combos and *Marvel Vs Capcom*-style assists.

MAK

Publisher Verge Game Studio | **Developer** In-house | **Format** PC | **Origin** US | **Release** 2013



This playful, physics-based sandbox – pronounced 'make' – is a fusion of *Minecraft*'s brick-building creativity and *Super Mario Galaxy*'s relative gravity. Developer Verge Game Studio insists there's a game in there, too, with multiplayer deathmatches and a full campaign, playable in singleplayer or co-op. After tanking on Kickstarter, *Mak* has passed muster on Steam Greenlight, and there's plenty of time for this intriguing concept to be fleshed out.



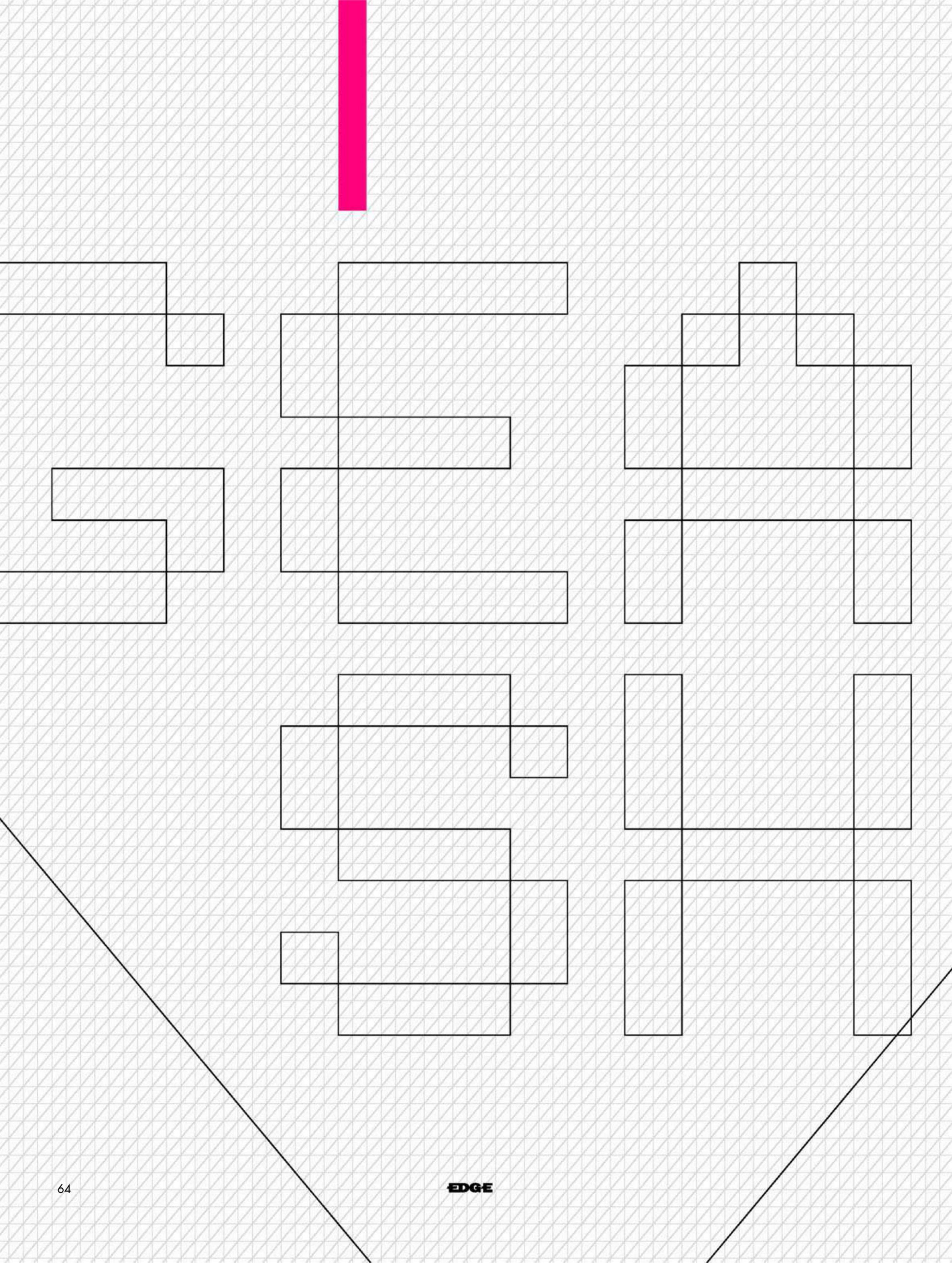
www.bit.ly/UPlKcA
Read more previews online

CYBERPUNK 2077

Publisher TBC | **Developer** CD Projekt Red | **Format** TBC | **Origin** Poland | **Release** TBC

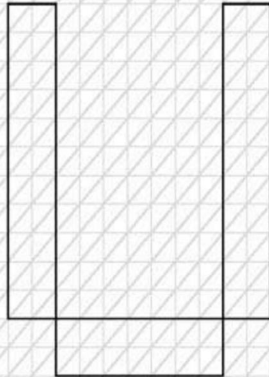


A CGI teaser trailer for the game based on Mike Pondsmith's tabletop RPG had almost six million views in a week. Set in Night City, *Cyberpunk 2077*'s story is one of a civilisation wrecked by the rapid pace of technological change. The streets teem with junkies on 'braindances', digital recordings of more interesting lives beamed directly into the user's brain. Megacorporations sell recordings of adventurers and explorers; a black-market one might cast you as a serial killer. We know it will be an open-world RPG, but *The Witcher* developer CD Projekt Red won't be drawn any further, giving the game's release date as "when it's ready".



RIFT

Unreal Engine 4 is building next-gen games now. We ask its creator, Epic, what they should look like



nderstanding Epic's vision for Unreal Engine 4 means having an appreciation for CTO **Tim Sweeney**'s notion of what 'next-gen' looks like. It's not a virtual place like the throne room of our cover star, the Elemental Knight, with per-pixel lighting and GPU particles. It's a real place where such technology makes sense. It's a world where doubled dev costs, something he anticipated at the Montreal International Game Summit in November, don't automatically bring about the end times. It's a place of games rather than tech demos.

A self-professed idealist, Sweeney sees that world existing largely, if not entirely, online. "The market is inefficient now," he declares. "You run ads on television so that people walk into a retail store, buy a piece of plastic and stick it into their digitally connected device. I think we have a lot of latitude – publishers and developers alike – to increase the efficiency of that. Once you have a game, it's available pervasively online, and your devices are all Internet-connected, do you really need to run television ads to get people to find it at the top of the App Store?

"I'm looking forward to our digital future. Development budgets are going to be the dominant cost in the industry, and [increasing] the efficiency of building games will directly improve profitability. As we move more sales of games out of retail, that creates a lot more flexibility for developers to make games at different scales and price them differently. So our feeling is that whatever scope of game you want to build, you can build that with Unreal Engine efficiently. And there will be a market there for that, [which] might not necessarily have existed in the current generation."

The word he likes to use is 'stratification', not just between the old tiers of gaming, but within them. It's less about rehabilitating the sorely missed middle tier than exploding the idea of the triple-A game, democratising it, and establishing "a continuum between the $1 App Store game and $60 retail games". We're seeing it already, he reminds us. "*Gears Of War 3* was super successful with maybe a third of the budget of a *Call Of Duty*, and *Infinity Blade* was even more profitable man-to-man with a team of 12 people. If you look at games that just encompass triple-A production values, there's a huge range of scales where games have been successful and profitable. You don't need $100 million to build a triple-A game. But if you want to spend that much, you can build one that looks absolutely insane."

"YOU DON'T NEED $100M TO BUILD A TRIPLE-A GAME. BUT IF YOU WANT TO SPEND THAT MUCH, YOU CAN BUILD ONE THAT LOOKS INSANE"

What such insanity actually looks like, however, is something not even Sweeney knows for sure. After all, a truly top-end project would probably modify UE4 far beyond the parameters of the Elemental demo. It probably wouldn't look like the UE3 Samaritan demo either, since that took 30 developers four months to make in all its three-minute glory, frightening Epic into trebling its tools team. "[Samaritan] was a stop on the road to getting to the right place," says VP **Mark Rein**. "It set us up for knowing what the challenges would be in the next generation. We had to make that a more productive process."

Furthermore, it's not for the person "trying to supply artists with paintbrushes", as Sweeney puts it, to presume how they're used. *Fortnite*, Epic's own UE4 game, at least shows us what real development conditions, a small team and vastly accelerated prototyping might achieve. On p72 you'll find Epic principal artist Shane Caudle's mini-prototypes, which venture further down the small team scale. What all these projects share is a deliberate, cohesive look, owed in part to a fully deferred renderer using global illumination.

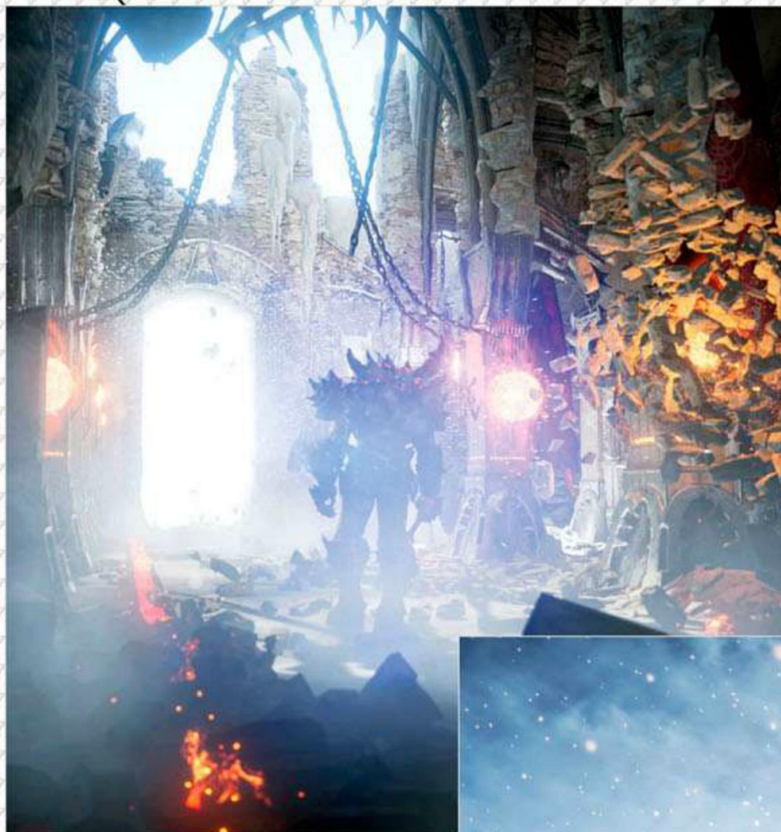
It certainly doesn't hurt that *Fortnite* changed its early art style to one evoking *Day Of The Tentacle*. While the tanned and grungy *Gears* look has faded in popularity in the latter years of UE3, *Fortnite* and Elemental conspire to banish it completely. Now we just need a few developers to come along and make licensed games with it to comedy deadlines. Then, perhaps, we'll find the de facto UE4 'look'.

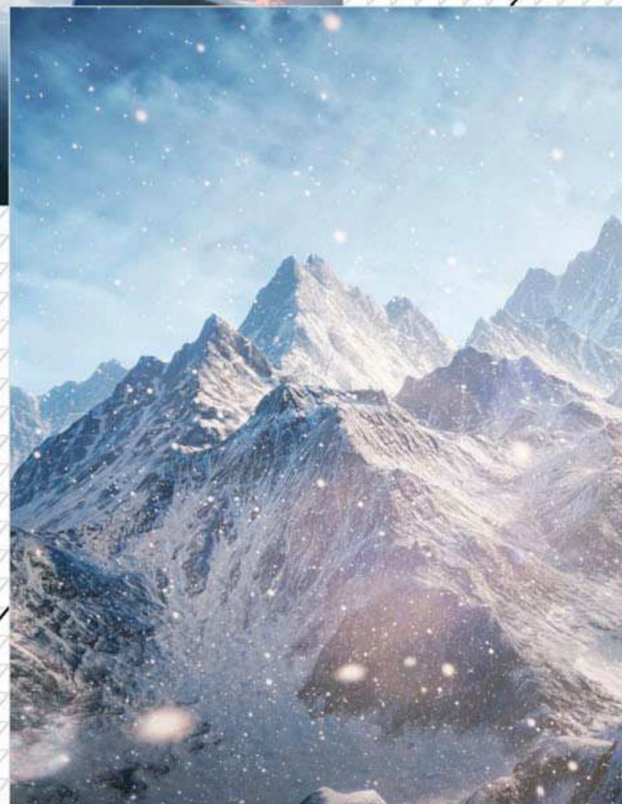
The full 8K shots for *Fortnite* demonstrate that antialiasing in UE4 right now still involves the best available shader-based solutions (in this case probably FXAA). As Sweeney ➜



SPEC OPS

Epic will know more than it's telling about tomorrow's consoles, though we have some insight into what it's working with (see p16). Specs and rumours for new Sony and Microsoft hardware suggest both could be capable of the 1-plus teraflop graphics performance at which Sweeney's said things "get interesting". But it's likely that the next-gen will spend its early days under the reign of Unreal Engine 3, inviting crass comparisons between the extensively bespoke *Star Wars 1313* and those first few UE4 games. With Square Enix signing a multi-year deal in October for both engines, you start to appreciate Epic's insistence that this is 'futuristic' technology. "We're more enthusiastic now than ever about the future of high-end platforms," Sweeney says. "What we're doing on high-end PCs is going to be representative of the future consumer gaming experience and it's going to be awesome. It's going to be a substantial leap over the current generation."







ABOVE AND LEFT **Voxel-based indirect lighting and hundreds of thousands of displaced GPU particles are the real weapons of the Elemental demo, the Knight's hammer radiating light that bounces between surrounding materials, binding scenes together in ways far superior to even complex ambient occlusion. Assuming DX11 becomes the norm, developers should also start implementing proper tessellated surfaces to achieve a greater sense of tactility and volume**



UNREAL ENGINE Z

Epic expects the first commercial UE4 title to be survival horror game *Daylight* from Seattle's Zombie Studios, maker of the popular *Blacklight* games. "Working with UE4 has enabled us to implement new design systems that allowed for quick iteration and prototyping," says creative director **Jared Gerritzen**. "The Blueprint system allows us to propagate the game's assets procedurally, which has saved an immense amount of time in our designing… Rendering using UE4 is where we've seen a lot of the evolution in this engine compared to UE3. The lighting and rendering techniques have helped our art team get the look and quality desired at a more efficient and rapid rate. And it's always fun to get new toys."



ABOVE AND RIGHT **Epic senior technical artist Jordan Walker became something of a household name within the 3D community thanks to his stunning interpretation of *Street Fighter II*'s 'Bathhouse' stage. His latest piece, seen here for the first time, is rendered in UE4 to show off the subtle shader effects and distinct material reflections made possible by, among other things, global illumination**

"AFTER BATTLING THESE SIMPLER, EASIER BUT KIND OF TOY LANGUAGES, C++ WON AS THE LANGUAGE FOR DEVELOPMENT"

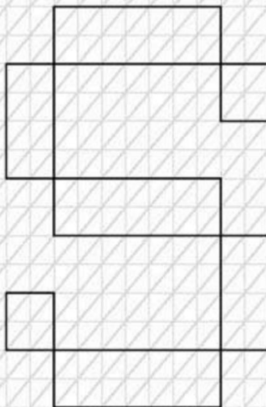


confirms, "the [antialiasing] answer is going to vary by hardware and performance spec, and the trade-offs each developer will want to make. On every platform, you have to decide what resolution you're going to run at – are you going to run at the device's full resolution? – and whether you use antialiasing versus pure graphical horsepower. Our goal as much as possible is to provide a grab bag of viable solutions, so that the developer can move between them as appropriate." And traditional multisampling? There's a pause. "It's complicated. I'm afraid we don't have an answer I can give you."

PC enthusiasts may not be enraptured yet, but a game running at 1080p with those aforementioned solutions should look just fine on a console and TV. And with UE4 exclusively targeting DirectX 11 (later will come "some form of fallback so we can run on DX9 and 10," says Sweeney) the solutions will likely improve. Texture pop-in, furthermore, that goblin of UE3 games, "will die with the end of live streaming of game data from optical media".

If some of these changes seem iterative, UE4 more gets disruptive when you look behind the scenes. And nowhere more so than in the abandoning of UnrealScript, Sweeney's object-oriented scripting language that's been a cornerstone since Unreal Engine's first days. Originally designed to be to 3D game programming what Java is to web coding, it's a valuable and eminently fathomable part of a modern developer's skillset. More than that, its endurance at the heart of this foremost of game engines has been key to Unreal's popularity, those old guides to making your first *Unreal Tournament* mutator being a lot more relevant now than *Unreal Tournament* itself.

UE4 will drop this layer entirely to leave an engine that's pure and 'highly optimised' C++. Script modding of the kind previously achieved through UnrealScript is still possible, but involves direct editing of the C++ via object properties.



weeney lists three reasons for the change. "When we started UE4 development, we made a wishlist of all the features we'd want to see in UnrealScript 4 to make it a competitive high-end next-generation scripting language. We wrote it all out and realised we'd basically defined C++ right there. Number two was that we realised an awful lot of overhead goes into this interoperability layer. Wherever you have software that's written in C++ but has its functionality exposed through a scripting language, there's this big barrier where a programmer now, when he's writing a system, has to think about which language to write and how to interface with the code on the other side. That's becoming an increasing amount of work, and it applies to any engine where you have something like UnrealScript or .NET or Mono integrated – [it's] a huge amount of overhead. Number three was the realisation that after battling these simpler, easier but kind of toy languages, C++ won as the language for game development."

It's an exciting change on the one hand. Whatever resources at Epic are being gobbled up by UnrealScript's maintenance will presumably soon benefit Kismet (more on that later) and the engine core instead. C++ programmers will no longer have to learn a new language, meaning a broader talent pool for devs to choose from. And, as Rein points out, "People have this expectation that the next iPhone, or the iPhone after that, is going to be more powerful than a game console, and it very well could be if we could get all the power out of it."

The benefits are such that it's hard to imagine much controversy, although there's already uncertainty. What does someone looking to learn Unreal do now? "Well, technology's always changing, right? And to be successful as a game developer, every few years we've had to reinvent our toolsets," says Sweeney. "Learning UnrealScript is a great C++-with-training-wheels experience, and you can do that now and then upgrade to C++ and learn a lot of awfully valuable skills along the way. The industry

is standardising C++ as the language for serious development of software. There are language wars and C# and Java, and they've been battling back and forth, but C++ is the lingua franca."

The logic seems sound. Many who have learned C++ or UnrealScript will agree that an object-oriented mindset is the first real hurdle for the new developer, so why not attempt it in the comfort of the latter and then upgrade?

Programmers will have the freedom to work exclusively in C++, but UE4 brings an added freedom: a dramatically empowered Kismet editor. Now a direct interface to C++ rather than the 'friendly face' of UnrealScript, it's a visual scripting tool that uses flowcharts to allow designers to make powerful prototypes and tweaks at a level that's close to the metal.

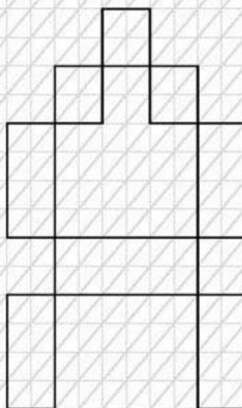
The 'Kismet 2' moniker has been dropped for 'the new Unreal Kismet', but its role's the same. Colour-coded nodes and improved context menus hope to keep it intelligible for those flummoxed by the spaghetti of complex scripts. Then you have all the live debugging features and 'Blueprint' templates. The *Fortnite* skybox is an example of the latter, where times of day trigger behaviours in Blueprints defining lampposts and the gameworld. Again, it's to help non-programmers do more.

"ONE ARTIST WORKING FOR SIX MONTHS CAN BUILD A GAME WITH UNREAL ENGINE 4 WITHOUT PROGRAMMING ANYTHING"

"The engine improves art production, content creation, iteration between programmers and artists… One artist working for six months can build a game with Unreal Engine 4 without actually programming anything and ship it, something on the scale of *Angry Birds*," believes Sweeney. "And when you get to digital distribution and new methods of monetisation that don't require paying huge amounts of money upfront, you have this huge new potential to reinvent the game industry."

All of that said, "if you want to write a game in pure C++, you can do that without using Kismet 2 whatsoever. It's just designed to give content creators the flexibility to create gameplay events and behaviour that's more natural for them to do than a programmer.

"The big rationale is that each developer is most productive when they can just work on their stuff and do every aspect without complex coordination with other people. But that system doesn't preclude programmers from taking total control of everything. And UE4 is really vastly more flexible in its capabilities through the C++ interface than UE3 was through the UnrealScript interface. The entire engine is exposed, rather than just the gameplay portions."



nother big but seldom discussed change is Unreal Slate. Handling both in-game and editor UIs, Slate's implications for current UE3 UI solution Scaleform are unclear, but Slate does the lot. And because source code can be edited and recompiled on the fly in UE4, UIs are adjustable, too. From an editor perspective, it means an artist could have a totally different UI scheme to a programmer.

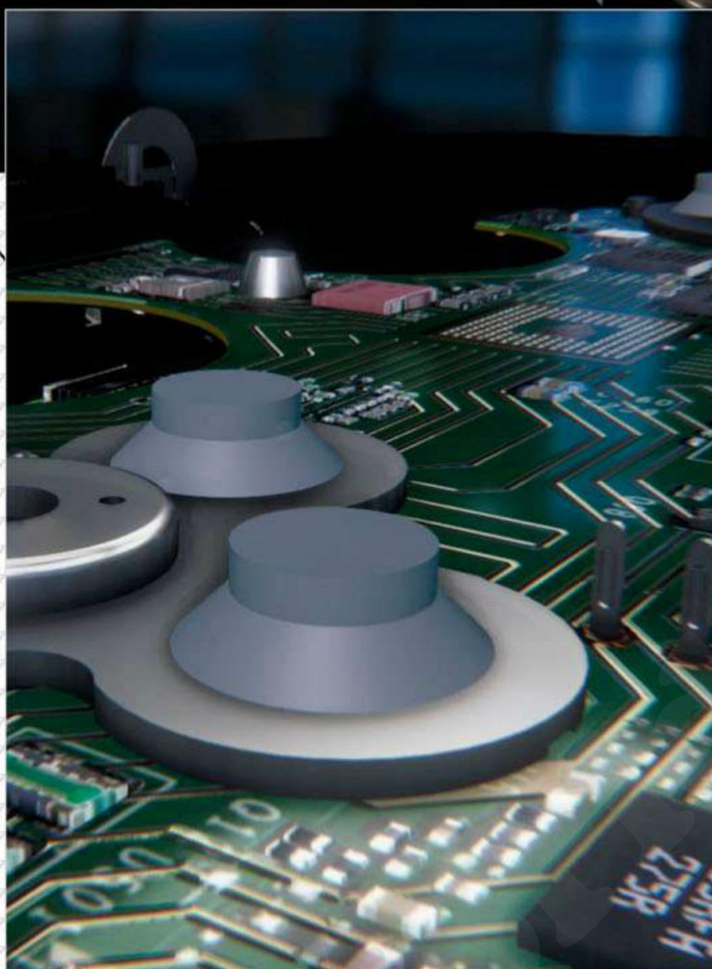
Of course, ever since Epic democratised its engine with the Unreal Developer's Kit, a version that's free to build games in and costs just $99 to be able to sell commercial products, any change in the engine tends to prompt questions about UDK. In this case, you have to wonder what an 'exposed engine' means for the distinction between UDK and the full engine, which used to be access to the source code. That's assuming there even is a UDK4 and when it might appear. This is not an area Epic wants to discuss right now.

"I can tell you that we have some very big plans around UE4, making it available and pervasive and useful to the indie community," hints Sweeney. "I can't tell you what or when at this point, but stay tuned. Everyone will be really tickled by what we do."

It would be easy to scoff that much of this – the dynamic lighting, DX11 support, Flowgraph-style Blueprints, and 'realtime all the time' nature of the editor – has long been part of CryEngine 3. But it's not so easy to say that the similarity is to UE4's detriment. A compelling feature of Epic's pitch is that it isn't downplaying the things other engine builders did first. With the aces of documentation, community, marketing and reputation in its hand, and the stakes of development only getting higher, Epic is playing it cool. That pragmatic attitude does a lot to make the whole idea of the next generation a lot less intimidating to the legions of developers waiting to start building it. ■



ABOVE **Epic steadfastly refuses to discuss UE4 platforms, though Rein assures us that "the important ones" will be supported. Where that leaves something like the Tegra 4-powered Shield, given Epic's cautious approach to previous Android platforms, is unknown. UE3 title *Hawken* has been used to demo the hardware, but its selling point remains the streaming of games rendered on a local PC**



ABOVE **Those expecting the UE4 portion of Nvidia's Project Shield demo at CES 2013 to play across the handheld's screen were in for a shock: Unreal actually rendered the entire high-gloss flythrough of the console itself. A rare use of thirdparty tech by Nvidia, it relied heavily upon UE4's revamped Matinee system for cinematics**



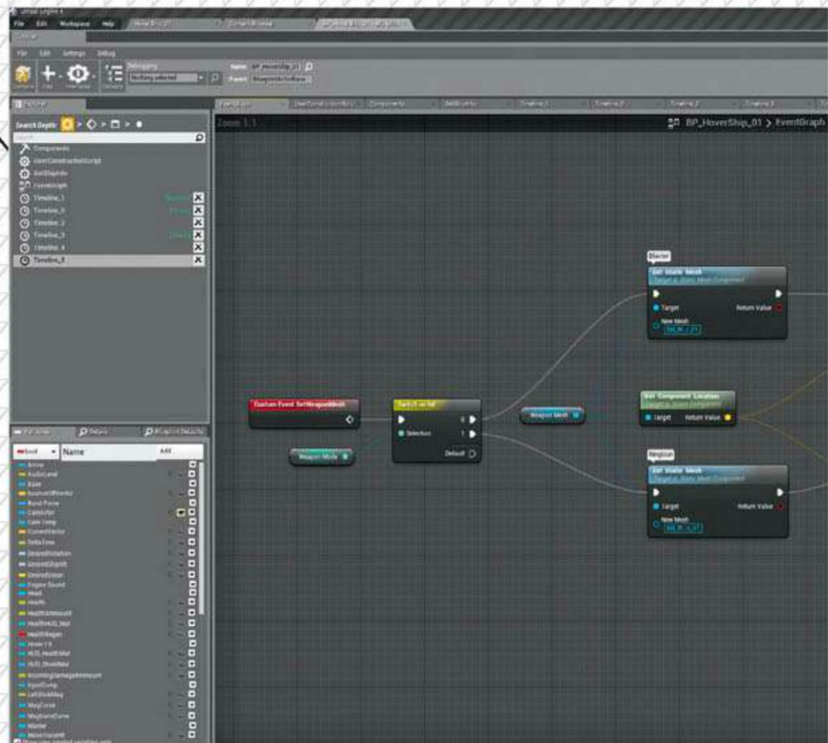


FROM TOP: **Mark Rein and Tim Sweeney have stuck with Epic through a recent round of high-profile departures. Reinvention and "a healthy paranoia" are typical, Rein says, the company's latest games taking it back to its PC roots**



BELOW AND RIGHT **Principal artist Shane Caudle supplies these two examples of 'indie' UE4 development, where the popular top-down camera is just window dressing. It's the rapid iteration and realtime editing possible in UnrealEd that should make this level of polish common to even the smallest project. The lack of firstperson shooter demos is telling, with the fear of Unreal becoming a 'template system'**





"HAVE YOU GOT ENOUGH PARTICLES IN THE SCENE? COULD YOU DOUBLE THE COUNT WITHOUT AFFECTING FRAMERATE?"

ABOVE **The new colour-coded GUI is a refreshing change from the current state of Kismet, though the onus will presumably stay on the user to keep scripting clean. Slate promises realtime control over not just the layout and selection of windows, but also the UI of the game being made**



Q&A: KEITH JUDGE & ROBERT TROUGHTON





Sunderland might not sound like a vital outpost of Unreal Engine 4 R&D, but Pitbull Studio certainly is. It has a new studio in Guildford and an NHS innovation award (for its *Circus Challenge* game for sufferers of strokes and cerebral palsy), but its credentials make more sense when you consider its history with Midway. As Midway Newcastle, it showed tenacity in seeing through *The Wheelman*, one of Unreal's precious few open-world driving games. And staff from *Driver* maker Reflections, as well as those who worked on *Rage*, add further experience in an area seldom visited by Epic's licensees. We ask MD **Robert Troughton** and senior programmer **Keith Judge** if that's about to change.

How suitable was Unreal Engine 3 for *The Wheelman*?

Robert Troughton The engine was definitely very capable. It needed some small modifications; that's really the benefit of having the source code licence. The way Epic have structured their engines means it's very easy to do that.

Will developers be more adventurous with UE4?

RT I think so. Epic had all of the tech there to do that sort of game. Most of the problems we had getting *Wheelman* to work were problems with the platform itself. When 360 released, you weren't guaranteed to have a hard drive, so your game had to run off DVD. You'd be driving through the city at very high speed, and when you got to a certain point the character gets out of the car and it starts playing a movie, so that had to be preloaded on console. There'd be very high quality dynamic audio playing, also streaming off the DVD. We were absolutely stressing that console, maxing out the CPU, GPU; the DVD player was constantly reading. To be honest, until about six months before we shipped, we didn't know if we could do it. And PlayStation 3; the way the memory's structured on PS3 caused all kinds of headaches.

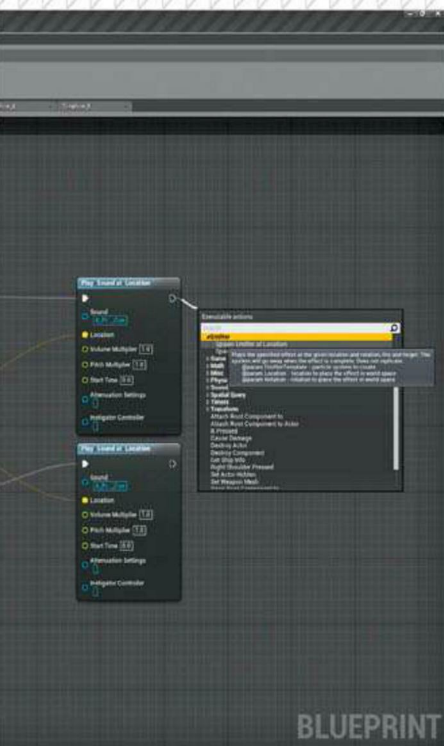
You say you're introducing 'new technology' into UE4. Can you elaborate?

RT A lot of the systems that were present in Unreal Engine 3 are getting huge overhauls in UE4. Obviously Epic are aware of what the other engine teams are doing. They know about features that are going into other engines, what developers like about other engines. We have people that are part of the rendering team at Epic; we're working on the new UI system, the new Kismet tool, physics, audio platforms, editor features, optimisation, memory. We're working across the board with Epic, trying to help them make sure they're the best they can be.

Will future consoles meet UE4's requirements?

Keith Judge UE4 already works with high-end PCs and is scalable from laptops all the way up. One of the big problems with current-gen and particularly the generation before was just getting used to the consoles in the first place. That was an immense challenge. I'm not mentioning any particular ones that were hard, but I'm sure you can guess. This time, whatever's in those consoles is going to be a lot easier to get up and running with. We won't have the same issues with early games being really quite poor. There isn't a massive change in the way that you'd have to build your technology from scratch.

RT The great thing about consoles, and this has been the same for 25 years, is that it's a fixed platform. If we develop a game and it runs at 60fps on our console, it's going to run at 60 on everybody's. UE4 has a lot of metrics in there that'll let you analyse different systems to make sure you're not overloading or underloading them. Have you got enough particles in the scene? Could you double the particle count in one scene without affecting the framerate, and so on?



AN AUDIENCE WITH...

SEAN 'DAY[9]' PLOTT

StarCraft's star commentator on the future of eSports and being a better gamer


BATTLE GROUNDS
AUSTIN
DAY [9]
TROMBONE SHORTY
AUSTIN CITY LIMITS SEASON 35

"With StarCraft, from a the only way you improve hard and looking deep at

Sean Plott, AKA Day[9], is one of the most prominent figures in eSports. Having been a professional *StarCraft: Brood Wars* player, he then became a commentator, following after his brother, Nicolas 'Tasteless' Plott. Sean established his own five-day-a-week web show, Day9TV, in 2009. He has a warm, energetic style that's also remarkably comprehensible, opening a window into the incredible complexities of one of eSports' mainstays. Through this he's helped to spur a new kind of appreciation for games, one that's as much about watching them as playing.



CV

Sean Plott started playing *StarCraft*'s first expansion in 1999 at the age of 13, and began qualifying for the World Cyber Games in 2004, winning the Pan-American Championship in 2007. His YouTube webshow, Day[9]TV, currently has over 300,000 subscribers and covers more games than simply *StarCraft*, but in-depth analysis of that game remains his core line.

Was Day[9]TV's tagline, "Be a better gamer", there from the very beginning?

It wasn't, but I've always been interested in the whole idea of improvement, study and really careful analysis. Honestly, one of my most favourite things is taking a really complicated concept and explaining it in an understandable fashion. A lot was born out [of] my interest in math. My college was adamant that students be good presenters. We would have to explain really complicated mathematical ideas in exactly five minutes, otherwise we'd be cut off. It was an interesting exercise in throwing out the unnecessary fat. The daily show I began was about that. It's so easy, especially with a game like *StarCraft*, to fall into the trap of those common phrases and throw them around, like, 'I wanted to make sure I had a smooth transition ready.' That doesn't really mean anything.

At what experience level do you pitch the shows?

What ends up growing are the strategies. As players get smarter and do more sophisticated things, you naturally have new topics to talk about. I do my best to avoid saying buzz phrases and as a result it should be a comfortable entry point if you hop in, but I use language and concepts you have to be familiar with *StarCraft* to understand. It's a balance to not say too much that's bland, obvious and flat, like, 'Well, he's making workers and building workers is good,' because everyone should understand that. But I'll still want to have enough in there so the longtime viewer has new stuff. I [might say], 'He hasn't missed a single worker – excellent job,' that hints players should always be building workers but doesn't throw more experienced players.

How much has changed in terms of player culture since you started casting?

Around 2010, when I started doing more tournament casting, [I noticed] an interesting shift: much of the *StarCraft 1* community was players; now there are a lot more straight fans and spectators who might not log into *StarCraft* for months. You end up with this interesting discussion, like in a sports bar: 'What a horrible play; you'd think a professional player would do better…' That language transitions naturally to the *StarCraft* scene. What's stayed consistent is if you want to go play American football, you need two full teams, armour and a field. With *StarCraft*, you can see something cool and try it a minute later. There's such a small barrier to watching expert play and enacting the fantasy.

What caused that explosion in fan culture?

It was streaming, the rise of places like Twitch.tv. In 2008 and before, streaming was hard and expensive. For a live event, most of the budget went to broadband. Now streaming is really cheap and easy. It's easy for tournaments to pop up, and there are tons of players streaming themselves playing, so it's easy to get on the Internet and find a way to watch. With *StarCraft*, people like cool strategies and thinking about them, and with streaming you can get a deep appreciation for players. After two-and-a-half years, you have a ton of people saying they don't really play but they watch every day.

Do you need to be a great player to be a great caster?

I think you need to study a lot. An amazing football coach doesn't need to be an amazing player. It's the same in *StarCraft*; some is knowledge and some is execution. A lot of casters are behind on execution, but I'm a strong believer in studying the game, and also to be able to look at the game and still be able to draw conclusions about what the action implies. Just knowledge isn't enough. It's a terrible spot to be in, watching a game and not being sure what's going down.

How have you stayed interested in *StarCraft* for so long?

It's always changing. It's like 24: you know Jack Bauer is going to beat the shit out of some terrorist and be in a lot of intense situations, but you don't know how. You're familiar with the characters, and that familiarity makes it really fun.

player's perspective, is by working really yourself"



Sean Plott identifies the readability of *StarCraft*'s sides and units as one of the reasons it has achieved such success as an eSports mainstay

With *StarCraft*, coming from a player's perspective like mine, the only way you improve is by working really hard and looking deep at yourself. At a high level, there's no resource you can go to. If there's an obvious strategy, people have figured it out already, or if there's a subtle one, everyone else copies it. So you dig deep into strategy, and you start to understand the huge, hidden well of possibilities. Even if I'm watching a strategy I've seen 50 times before, I'll see new stuff. It feels new all the time.

You talk a lot about the idea of personal improvement in eSports, but traditional sports spectators are there purely for entertainment. Does that mean there's a fundamental difference?

I think eSports has a 'you can do it too' thing. There's a thinner barrier between player and spectator that's unique. The more accessible a physical sport is, the more there is that yearning for improvement. But in any game, there's a sense that the more you know, the more there is to enjoy. Something as simple as a batting average in baseball – it gives meaning and understanding. In one show, I showed examples of a strategy played by StarTale's Bomber, who made three bases and started upgrades really early so he could do a big attack at 14 minutes. If he did it at 13, it'd be too small; at 15, it'd be too late. After the show, Bomber played the strategy in all three of his games in a tournament and I got loads of tweets saying it was cool to watch because they could see exactly what was happening. Knowing makes watching a hell of a lot more exciting.

You and other leading casters have become a big part of *StarCraft*'s success. Has that changed your relationship with the game?

I'm sometimes torn. The mindset I had hammered into me from playing *StarCraft 1* was that you shouldn't complain about what you don't have any control over. It's easy to say the Marine is too strong or whatever, and it doesn't help you win – in fact, it's detrimental to winning. I learned to instead work out how to optimise my play. I take the same approach to the content I produce. If I don't have the right features built into *StarCraft*, what's the best way to include them? But then there are times like when the [*Heart Of The Swarm*] beta client messes with my encoder for some reason. Maybe I can go to Blizzard and ask them to fix it, but I don't feel I have a specific right to claim anything over Blizzard. Certainly, I maintain the right to own the content I have made – there's an EULA that permits it. It's an interesting new media relationship, but I'm very satisfied with the way it works.

Can eSports break outside gamer culture in the west like it has in South Korea?

Oh yeah. In probably eight to 15 years, we'll be there. It's just a cultural barrier. People who grew up playing games are now having kids. When I have a child and he asks to have friends over, I'll suggest having a LAN party. That's just going to happen over time. How did you learn the rules of football? No one ever opened a manual and read the rules – they're cultural; on TV, at school, with friends. As this generation has kids, become teachers, establish eSports clubs – it's a matter of time.

Will *StarCraft* reach that kind of popularity?

I think *StarCraft* has already made huge strides in that department. The visuals have such clarity that you can identify the red and blue armies; Protoss looks distinct to Terran. I've been able to bring people in quickly: 'The blue guy is trying to get more money but the red guy isn't letting him,' and boom, they start. With firstperson shooter games, it's hard to know what the right camera angle is, so probably fighting games are the clearest game type. There's no special camera angle; there's a life bar, people are punching each other. But if you think about observing versus playing, they don't have to have anything to do with each other. Think about the camera angle at a football match. It's nothing at all what it's like to play. With every game, there's a big question over the best way to observe it. Would *StarCraft* be better to watch if the view was backed up 50 per cent so you can see more? I don't know. And it's that cultural thing again. A light switch isn't actually intuitive, it doesn't appear in nature, but over time we've developed a grammar for the switch. In chess, you place pieces on the squares, not the intersections, and that's an accepted grammar. I get the feeling that as eSports get more popular and accepted, people will get a better sense of the grammar of games. ■

HAR
BET
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STRO

Meet the powergamers, a breed of hardcore MMOG fans who strive

D E R
T E R
T E R
N G E R

to master in-game feats first, and shape virtual lands in the process

Being at the top comes with a cost, as powergamer **Jonathan Delise** discovered. "Eventually, I became a target," he says. "Player versus player (PvP) fights in other factions' cities would turn into witch-hunts, [with] disparate teams working together to track me down and kill me. There were times when I became a one-man army, entire days where I completely disrupted play for other factions. People would rage at me in whispers, pissed that I was crushing dozens of high-level players alone. In my final days of playing the game, I would take on five-man Heroic-level dungeons and 40-man and 25-man raids solo – just my character. I was unstoppable, a killing machine."

Rewind to the three days following the release of *World Of Warcraft*'s *Wrath Of The Lich King* expansion. Delise played almost without pause. He stopped only momentarily at his desk to eat and drink, the need for intermittent dozing and defecation seen as infuriating biological interruptions by the young player, delaying his quest to rise through the rankings first. In-game, he accepted every quest he was offered, assimilating the experience points, but discarding those activities he believed would take too long to complete. He never idled, only pressed forward.

"At first I wanted to become very good… In time, my only interest was in becoming the best"

On the fourth day, Delise's character hit the numerical ceiling: level 80. He missed out on the accolade of becoming the first player on his server to 'max out' a character by a matter of minutes. It was a failure: no one remembers the guy who came second, right? Nonetheless, Delise's attitude to the game had been changed beyond recognition by this impromptu quest for world-first glory. He slept for two days. When he awoke, playing *World Of Warcraft* was no longer a pastime, it was a pursuit.

The next day, he abandoned the online group of friends he had played *World Of Warcraft* with for close to three years to enlist in a new 'powergamers' guild. It was made up of those who weren't playing to socialise or kill time. This group played only to win.

In *World Of Warcraft*, one measure of a player's success or status is loot: the rare clothes, elusive weapons and other desirable, wearable trophies that bespeak great effort or talent to the rest of the game's population. Another measure is a player's Damage Per Second. This figure represents their proficiency with a mouse and keyboard – their physical, human ability to make inputs in the shortest possible amount of time – combined with the quality of their 'theorycraft', the strategies and tactics they've developed to maximise effectiveness in play. Within a month of joining the group, Delise had the highest DPS in the guild and one of the highest in the world.

Soon Delise and his companions – having long held the distinction of being the top players on their own patch of virtual soil – decided to move to a new server in order to seek out sturdier competition. The move brought fresh challenge and rivalry, but in time the allure of raiding dulled as well. Delise's mentality was hardening every week. Where others played the game for enjoyment, he became obsessed with the deeper systems that underpin it, and with crafting strategies essential for dominance in the game's purely competitive PvP modes, where he now spent his time.

"When I first started playing *Wrath Of The Lich King*," Delise says, "I was a decent-enough player. I took playing the game seriously. At the point at which I quit raiding to focus on PvP, I'd nearly reached the pinnacle of skill possible solely in PvE [player versus environment, the AI monsters and nonhuman systems arranged by the game's designers to challenge gamers]. The transition from a casual player who takes their play seriously to a 'powergamer' was a deliberate one. In time, it became an obsession. At first I wanted to become very good at the game. In time, my only interest was in becoming the best."

Delise formed a three-man PvP team and began developing tactics in earnest. Every day after school he would read about *World Of Warcraft* strategies or watch videos of high-level players for five hours, then put what

JONATHAN
DELISE

GLADIATOR
ACHIEVEMENT

12 . 10 . 2010

HOW TO BECOME A POWERGAMER

David Chartier, a 24-year-old powergamer from New York City, offers five pieces of advice for players wanting to become the best at their chosen MMOG.

1. GET AHEAD OF THE CURVE
"This is key. You must acquire an early lead and then maintain that lead. More often than not, this advantage can be won immediately after a game's release. But whether it's a level advantage or gear advantage, it's almost always earned by pure man hours."

2. DO YOUR RESEARCH
"Read up on whatever you can about the game. Patch notes offer great insight into what developers find improperly balanced in a game and can be exploited. Often, you'll come across something getting buffed a little too hard [that] may be worth checking out, or something nerfed too hard and not worth checking out. Reading up on gameplay pre-release and reading up on strategies post-release is essential."

he had learned into practice for the remaining hours before bed. "I spent almost as much time on gaming as I did on school," he says. "I worked on my homework in class so I'd have more time after school to read up on *World Of Warcraft*. I spent enormous amounts of time researching and I paid complete attention to the game so that I would never die or take unnecessary damage. I'd spend hours, days, weeks and months theorycrafting – testing strategies to eliminate weakness."

The effort paid off, at least in the game. Delise and his two PvP companions won the coveted Gladiator achievement for climbing into the top 0.5 per cent of teams and holding that position until the end of the arena season. "By this point, I was one of the best players in the world. I could crush anyone that opposed me, even when I was outnumbered by other good players."

That's when the witch-hunts started. Other factions would often pursue him, interrupting his ambitious solo raiding missions with surprise attacks. But Delise's proficiency didn't only offer a thrown gauntlet to other players, it also provided a helping hand. He'd write guides and offer one-on-one training sessions to help improve individual players. Not all of this aid was offered for free. Delise would earn up to $200 for playing another player's character up to an 1,800 or 2,000 rating in order to grant them access to rating-locked PvP gear. In short, his obsession paid.

It's become fashionable to divide videogames into two loose classifications: casual and hardcore. The former is a term used to describe games with ostensibly shallow depths, gentle learning curves and often a cutesy, mass-market-friendly art style. By contrast, so-called 'hardcore' games tend to offer considerable depths and a steep learning curve that can only be surmounted with concerted effort.

But the terminology is both unhelpful and misapplied. Casual and hardcore better describe a player's state of mind than a game's possibility space. It's possible to play *Bejeweled* – PopCap's prime exemplar of a 'casual' game – with grim determination and a resolve to master its systems. Likewise, you can be casual in your approach to *Dark Souls*, FromSoftware's notoriously challenging action game, ignoring its intricacies and depths.

Players with hardcore mentalities can be found investing in almost any sort of videogame. But the powergamer holds a unique position in the world of the MMORPG, where their speedy consumption of content and relentless race to be the best can change the way in which games grow and their worlds develop over time.

Isaiah Cartwright is the lead designer on *Guild Wars 2* at ArenaNet, which chose to invite powergamers to play its game early on in development. As he explains: "We specifically invited people of this ilk, who will become way better than all of us on the development team, to play the game at an alpha and beta stage. Doing so allows us to balance for this type of player and also helps to show up the challenges and bugs in the game a lot more quickly. It's hugely important for us."

> "We specifically invited people of this ilk, who will become way better than us, to play the game at alpha"

Despite the early heads up that enrolling powergamers gave the *Guild Wars 2* team, the speed at which the first players raced through the game on its release in 2012 was still startling. "No matter how much you account for or cut the numbers, players will always do things faster than you think," says Cartwright. "The first player reached the *Guild Wars 2* level cap in just three days. He did it by playing nonstop, working together with a large number of people in his guild and having them pool their resources together. Then, with those resources, he crafted items [to expedite his progression]. We knew that crafting was something that could get you through the levels quickly, but we also knew it would take a lot of people working together to achieve this."

Powergamers introduce a problem for MMOG designers, however. Their quickness in making it through a game often inspires them to write the guides new players will read for tips. As such, they can often set the tone for how a game is received by its community.

But despite this power, they represent only a vocal fraction of the overall audience.

"Powergamers only represent a small niche, so it's important to not only create content for them," says Cartwright. "There's some ensuring we have some valves and knobs to turn in order to deal with players burning through things quickly. But the goal is always to make sure the players have the most enjoyable experience, and we don't want to hinder or destroy that. That said, it's interesting to make hard content. Soon an unspoken challenge develops between the designer and the powergamer: the designer racing to create fair-but-tough activities, the powergamer racing to master them."

The pursuit of mastery – and the in-game social kudos that follows – is what often tempts a normal player into becoming a powergamer. **Justin Edmond** from Alberta, USA, joined the only raiding guild on his server because he had "a vague idea" this was how players could acquire the best equipment for their character.

"At first, I started playing *World Of Warcraft* with the sole aim of beating Ragnaros, the final boss at the time," he says. "Killing him was such a huge event: we had tried for weeks, and when he finally dropped I still remember screaming on voice chat as the loot was shared and we returned to town. We were showing off our loot and everyone was so excited. After that, it was a case of trying to recreate that thrill. We did this by attempting server- and world-firsts. When the next update game, Blackwing Lair, launched, we all set [our] alarm clocks for 3am, waking up before school to play. Wanting to be the best, and wanting our guild to be the first is what motivated me. It was exciting to reach an encounter and figure out how to beat it so you could say you were the first guys to do so. Not only were you praised for your speed by others, but you had the enjoyment of figuring out how to beat the challenge."

Edmond was a keen sportsman and musician at school, but the thrill of acquiring a world-first in *World Of Warcraft* offered a far greater buzz than "beating another group of 16-year-old kids from a small town". While Edmond was an accomplished student with good grades, active in the science fair, and regularly entering national school jazz band competitions, something about competing on an international scale proved more enticing than anything he had yet experienced.

"I was really into spreadsheets and math, so I did a lot of the early theorycrafting for maximising DPS," he explains. "I loved trying to find the optimal solution to a problem. I could use logic, math and problem-solving, and I could find answers that would cause people all over the world to change their gameplay. To be admired by so many people was a great feeling. It started to get more serious once I took on more of a role in the guild. We'd be the centre of a lot of drama, and the forums would always be talking about us. We were popular in this online world, and the power and attention was an amazing feeling for a 16-year-old kid from a small town."

As Edmond's role in the guild grew greater and he developed leadership qualities, he found the way in which he interacted with others outside of the game began to subtly shift. "It was hard for a shy kid like me to stand up and boss people around," he says. "As I started to develop this assertiveness, it caused me some problems at school, [since] I went from somebody people listened to and respected in the game world to just another kid in a sea of schoolchildren. At that age, it was really hard to keep both worlds separate. It was easy to want to value the game world more than the real world, [since] I felt more appreciated there. I can't imagine I would be even a fraction as accomplished as I am today without the time I put into powergaming. It really shaped who I am today. I was a very shy kid when I started playing MMOGs, but they've taught me so much about hard work, teamwork and problem-solving."

For others, the powergamer lifestyle has had less positive effects. **Matthew Boyle** began playing *EverQuest* when he was 19, a time when he was working a night shift in a factory. At first, playing was a hobby, a way to pass the afternoons before he left for work. But when Boyle lost his job, the focus changed. "I didn't go balls to the wall right away," he says, "but I did become severely addicted. The real transition happened when the exploration and thrill of this new world

3. EXPERIMENT
"When you begin to take gaming seriously in this way, at some point you'll go searching for an answer and you won't find one. That's when you need to turn around and ask yourself whether you want to wait around for someone else to discover the answer, or do you want to put in the time to figure it out? This could be as simple as playing around with talent calculators, drawing up raid strategies for new bosses, or figuring out a new way your team can play against other teams."

4. BETA TEST
"Joining a beta release of a game gives you the chance to play ahead of the rest of the pack. If you've ever replayed a game, you probably found it was 'faster' to get through on your second attempt. Through repetition, you learn to level quickly and efficiently skip the things that delayed [you] the first time, and a beta offers the chance to do this while the heat is off."

5. COLLABORATE
"The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Through collaboration, we gain precious knowledge about a game. Whether it's the guy who spends every waking hour playing, the guy who knows the developers personally, or even just the guy obsessed with posting every snippet of info about a game to your guild forums, you won't get very far without these folks."

faded. Now the goal was to become better than the next person.

"The friend that introduced me to the game ending up staying at my apartment and introduced me to a more hardcore way of playing. We were on a levelling binge, and instead of taking turns playing, we would take turns sleeping. After that, the average day involved waking up to log in, and playing till I couldn't stay awake any longer. This sometimes went on for days at time until [I'd fall] asleep in a puddle of drool, and [wake] up with a waffle print on my face from the keyboard."

Boyle's impoverished circumstances fuelled his interest in the game. "I had no job, a horrible girlfriend, and a slum of an apartment with no heating or windows. I would skip showers, because the place was so horrendously cold [that] I'd rather deal with the discomfort of being filthy. But in the game, I was in the top 500 worldwide. I was a success. So there was more of a motivation to better my avatar and go for numbers in rankings than there was to further my education. When achieving an ultra-hard kill, or getting rare loot, I could only compare that feeling to what I would assume achieving something great within a team might feel like."

"You can find scare stories about people destroying their lives doing almost anything"

Powergaming is the pursuit of the time-rich, primarily the domain of students and unemployed – those able to dedicate the swathes of time necessary to master the game and then maintain that mastery. But while Edmond is able to see the benefits of the time he dedicated to powergaming, Boyle is less convinced of its positive impact on his life. "It was an absolute loss of time," he says. "I took nothing good away from it. Instead, I lost several years of my life I could have done something else with. It was a cause of concern [to] and disgust from my family, like a bad drug addiction where you would sacrifice nearly everything for the monthly subscription and Internet access. Those days were far from glamorous, and what money was made from playing got dumped back into the game to afford the addiction. It took boredom for me to finally break the cycle."

Delise takes a more balanced view of his time as one of the powergaming elite. "I view that hectic year-and-a-half of hardcore play very happily," he says. "The challenge of playing against other capable players was incredible. It was both the most difficult and most fun time I've had in my life. I think it was good for me, because it helped develop my focus and ability to learn new things very rapidly, but at the same time I could have been working a job at the time or learning to deal with people face to face better than I do. The impact on my life was considerable. To this day, I'm far more comfortable writing than talking, for example."

While many powergamers set aside the pursuit of in-game excellence as they grow older and life's demands diminish their free time and energy, it seems that the inner hardcore mentality developed through these experiences is not so easily discarded. "To this day, I still enjoy playing games at the top tier," says Edmond. "When you're just a casual gamer, if you want to be the best, you generally follow the instructions that the hardcore players give you, either through guides or personal help. When you're at the top level, you have to experiment and truly understand the concepts. This gives you more freedom in a way. Most of us [powergamers] still enjoy the challenge of figuring out a game and getting to the top, but we no longer desire the stagnant gameplay of remaining there."

While Boyle's negative experiences mean he'd warn others off this mode of play, Edmond's more pragmatic. "Don't listen to all those horror stories about people who ruined their lives this way," he says. "People ruin their lives with partying. People ruin their lives by trying to be professional athletes. You can find scare stories about people destroying their lives doing almost anything. Setting a goal and accomplishing it is one of the greatest things a person can do. While I was powergaming, I encountered some players with no lives outside the game. Most of them I've kept in touch with and today they are almost all productive, happy people. Have fun, play hard and keep healthy." ■

JUSTIN EDMOND

BLACKWING LAIR BEATEN

12 . 07 . 2005

PLAY

REVIEWS. INTERVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

Earth Defence Force 2017 360, Vita
Back in 2007, *EDF 2017*'s prototypical take on shooting, looting, levelling and further shooting touched upon something nobody got around to perfecting until *Borderlands 2*. The Vita remake of Sandlot's schlocky sci-fi shooter often chokes under the weight of its giant bugs, but the RPG mechanics, those five-minute levels and the steady feed of novelty weapons are perfectly at home on a handheld desperately in need of accessible, bite-sized gaming.

Trials Evolution: Riders Of Doom 360
With the self-replenishing gold mine of *Evolution*'s Track Central, you could safely dump the rest of your game collection in the ocean and be content for a long, long while. But for RedLynx, DLC is a chance to remind its track-making community just who's boss. *Riders Of Doom* isn't just the latest collection of *Evolution* tracks, it's also the most imaginative and lavishly constructed set of courses yet.

VVVVVV 3DS, PC, Mac
It's amazing how creativity flourishes under constraints. Terry Cavanagh's classic dares to ask, 'What if we get rid of jumping?' The hookshot solution *Bionic Commando* came up with was good, but *VVVVVV*'s is better. Arriving again at the 'Doing Things The Hard Way' puzzle, it's a thrill committing to the gravity reversal that sends Captain Viridian hurtling upward through a gauntlet of spikes, and (hopefully) back down again.

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE



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In a changing industry, the only constant is time

There are so many pricing models for games nowadays – free-to-play, monthly subscription, 69p mobile games, £40 console releases – that the phrase 'value for money' means less than ever. The real commodity now is a player's time; whatever the up-front cost, the true measure of a game's worth is if it justifies the hours spent playing it. How do you ensure that, when the credits roll, players don't feel their time has been wasted?

The games we look at this issue have some very different answers to that question. *Persona 4 Golden* (p100) does it by packing a murder mystery, a dungeon crawler and an entire series of a high school comedy drama into a 90-hour runtime of which barely a second feels wasted. The first of *Kentucky Route Zero*'s five acts (p106) plays the role of a TV show pilot, an hour-and-a-half of scene setting and whetting the appetite for its next episode without giving too much away or outstaying its welcome.



It takes confidence to ask players to commit to a 90-hour game, and likewise to pay for a 90-minute one, but to craft something of *Dead Space 3*'s (p88) scale, you need the backing of a publisher with deep pockets. Money can't buy you pacing, though, and it's odd that a game so heavily and obviously inspired by sci-fi cinema should feel overlong. *The Cave* (p96), meanwhile, pads out its four-hour runtime by obliging players to repeat entire playthroughs in order to see everything it has to offer.

Plenty of answers, then, and not all of them good ones, but in an industry that's in a near-constant state of flux, experimentation is vital. As the battle for players' wallets becomes one for their free time, one thing's for sure: whether you're making a 90-hour game or a 90-minute one, pacing has never been more important.

Dead Space 3

You know the drill – it's the homicidal mining apparatus that figured in last year's E3 demo of *Dead Space 3*. We're at that very point in the game ourselves and the experience feels like trying to fend off a sudden Necromorph assault while trapped in the death-metal version of an automatic mixing bowl.

The new evasive dive roll move is coming in handy, allowing us to narrowly dodge the drill head, which veers unpredictably around the room, churning up sparks as its blades struggle to chew through the metallic floor. Even though Visceral tipped its hand on this set-piece ahead of the game's launch, experiencing it in the context of the full campaign underlines just how perfectly this instrument represents the design values that set *Dead Space* apart from the vast majority of shooters and sci-fi properties on the market.

Forget about *Halo* or *Mass Effect*'s vision of the future, all gleaming pearlescent surfaces and orderly contours. *Dead Space*'s aesthetic, in contrast, hinges on a memorable sort of blue-collar futurism. This newest entry feels most at home amid the cacophony, grime and muscle of industrial machinery. If you're playing this encounter in co-op, the banter between protagonist Isaac Clarke and soldier companion Sgt John Carver contains a noteworthy exchange. The frightened Clarke wonders aloud, "Now what?" His partner shouts back over the deafening clatter of the drill, "I don't know, you're the rocket scientist, you tell me!" To which Clarke replies, "I work on ships, not giant drills."

It's one of the rare moments where the game comes out and explicitly reminds us that, even though Clarke goes by the job title of engineer, he's really just a glorified spaceship repair guy who's way out of his depth. He's no space marine like Carver. There's no reason to believe Clarke has received any formal combat training. The dismembering aliens facet of his work he had to learn on the job. This is part of why he's such a likable hero: his is a classic underdog story.

Less likeable by far are the terrorists who help kick off the campaign. Why let modern military shooters have all the fun – or all the cash? Visceral clearly hopes to woo the sizable mainstream shooter audience that has made *Call Of Duty* one of the most profitable game franchises on the planet. Less than an hour into the game, players will find themselves in the streets of a Blade Runner-styled lunar colony called New Horizons, crouching behind chest-high walls, trading gunfire with zealots from the Church Of Unitology. Clarke has been forced out of his morose retirement by two unexpected visitors: the aforementioned John Carver and his prickly associate, Robert Norton. They're aware of Clarke's experience with the mysterious Markers that have threatened humankind, and they need his help with one last mission. Norton's ship is waiting to get them off the planet, presuming they can survive the siege.

Publisher Electronic Arts
Developer Visceral Games
Format 360 (version tested), PC, PS3
Release Out now

Cover shooting doesn't feel like a natural extension of Dead Space's combat, which is traditionally physical



Dead Space 3's cover-based shooting is competent but uninspired. Clicking the right analogue stick causes Clarke to crouch. You duck behind walls. Enemies take cover and shoot at you. You pop upright and shoot at them. Occasionally, they throw a glowing red grenade to flush you out of cover, forcing you to shoot at them from behind a different chest-high barrier. Eventually they die. But this approach doesn't feel like a natural extension of *Dead Space*'s combat, which is traditionally physical and takes place at close quarters. The average Necromorph couldn't be more eager to invade your personal space, dashing across the room towards you. Part of the horror of *Dead Space* stems from this feeling of molestation. Enemies mount you, gnaw on you, their pointy limbs desperate to impale. *Dead Space* combat is all about the terror of there being no place to hide. Cover-based shooting, by definition, says, 'You're in luck, I've got a place for you to hide right here!'

Every action epic needs a villain, of course. And we're introduced to *Dead Space 3*'s while passing through the lobby of a Unitology headquarters. In a looping video address that bears uncanny similarities to Andrew Ryan's 'man in Washington' speech, we're introduced to the head of the church, Jacob Danik.

He's voiced by the wonderful Simon Templeman who manages to imbue the character with sinister nobility. Danik has enjoined his followers to kill you for your part in destroying a handful of Unitology's revered Markers, ancient artefacts that channel nearly unlimited energy but also generate a host of crazy-making side effects in those who linger in their company.

Fortunately, the mainstream shooter vibe that hangs over the first chapter of *Dead Space 3* is simply the equivalent of a tourist travelling abroad and saying a few rehearsed lines in the foreign host's language as a means of ingratiating themselves before switching back to their native tongue. Cover-based shooting crops up later in the game, but very much as an afterthought. After Clarke escapes from the lunar colony and finds himself back in space, everything seems to pivot back into traditional *Dead Space* combat and environments. The Unitology terrorists are replaced by Necromorphs. The urban battlefields give way to the claustrophobic corridors of a new derelict ship, the CMS Roanoke, floating in orbit over a snow planet called Tau Volantis.

Visceral has invested in new tools for its characters' facial animation and cinematics, and the results are spectacular. It's not surprising that Clarke spends an unprecedented amount of time with his helmet off in this game. Visceral wants to show off its tech. In the first game, players had to wait till the final cinematic to meet the man behind the mask, a moment that felt like paying homage to the first *Metroid* game for the NES. There was even a revelation about its character, but one

ABOVE The zero-gravity sections outside the ship provide a poignant reprieve from the claustrophobia of the haunted corridors inside. Unfortunately, Visceral has made oxygen refill canisters so abundant that you never fear running low.

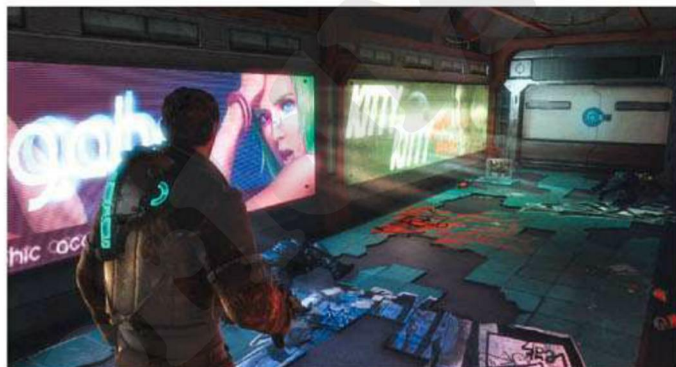


LEFT The game does a great job of subtly changing up its colour palette. This raid on a military compound at dusk sees the snowy white surface of Tau Volantis cast in an eerie blood-red glow

BELOW The combination of bright futuristic neon and the shabby disrepair of the New Horizons lunar colony feels unabashedly Blade Runner. Fighting as Isaac sans helmet for this early section seems like a tactic Visceral has employed to warm up new audiences



ABOVE *Dead Space 3* is eager to show that it can encompass more than just survival horror. By raising the curtain on a lunar colony at the opening, it's clear we're going to be taken on a farther-ranging journey than before



ABOVE Many Necromorphs make an encore appearance from previous games in the series. Not just the standard variety here, but also that annoying one you can't kill and must stall with stasis blasts as you flee

that centred on age rather than gender. We discovered that Isaac Clarke had grey hair. Though he clearly isn't elderly, the grey lends him a sense of world-weariness; here's an action hero that's years past his sell-by date.

It's not just faces that Visceral has made more natural, though. The transition between gameplay and cinematics is more seamless than ever before, employing the *Uncharted* method of subtly wresting control of Clarke as you pass into a dramatic section and returning control afterwards without any obvious membrane dividing the experience beyond the animation – which never gets old – of Clarke's helmet magically assembling or disassembling itself.

Dead Space 3's story pulls you along, but it's doomed to be upstaged by the world in which it plays out. The narrative you imagine happening inside the game's evocative interiors always outpaces the more prosaic 'save the world' plot at the macro level. Visceral might do well to make a *Dead Space* game in the style of *Dark Souls*, one that has no explicit story, just mysteries stacked upon deeper, yet more opaque mysteries.

The fact that Clarke is a spaceship repair guy adds an interesting realism to the litany of mundane gameplay objectives. Once you reach the CMS Roanoke, you immediately set to work fixing broken things. Over-familiar gaming tasks such as getting generators back online and collecting three discrete parts of some device scattered about a room would seem like bizarre busy work for a superhero. But this would be a normal day's work for an engineer like Clarke, and *Dead Space 3* can feel at times like a demanding foreman.

Significant alterations have been made to the weapon system. Instead of buying weapons with cash looted throughout the ship, you must instead scavenge resources – tungsten, semiconductors and so forth – and construct your own hybrids at crafting benches scattered throughout the game. Some players will find it annoying to have to build their guns, but the new mechanic adds to the survivalist feel. With the environments being in such a post-apocalyptic state, the idea of using cash to buy things is discordant. That would imply a healthy, functioning economy, while the crafting benches and the jury-rigging sound effects contain unmistakable echoes of *Fallout 3*.



AMMO COUNT
In order to compensate for the complexity of the game's crafted weapon chimeras, Visceral has simplified how ammo works, creating a unified, one-size-fits-all ammo system. It's certainly less cumbersome, but it also invites you to get in a rut with one particular gun without being forced to alter your approach based on what ammo you happen to have left in your inventory. In nearly 20 hours of play, we never once ran out of ammo. For a game that's ostensibly proud of its survival-horror roots, this is a problem.

Each weapon is capable of containing an upper tool and a lower tool, which means any given gun can have two mix-and-match firing types. You can build a weapon that fires saw blades with the upper tool and shotgun blasts with the bottom one. Or perhaps you want a rocket launcher in the upper slot and electrical charges on the bottom. There are also attachment slots that allow for a variety of combat buffs.

There are moments of breathtaking ambience and grandeur in *Dead Space 3*, especially in those zero-gravity moments spent floating in a vast interstellar debris field, taking a break from the din of pistons and valves and blast furnaces. The sense of immersion is about as unparalleled as you can get without an Oculus Rift strapped to your head. But the campaign feels overlong and stretch marks begin to appear towards the end of the roughly 20-hour adventure. This game could have benefited from some strategic dismemberment of its own, performed by a shrewd editor who knows how to sever redundant limbs.

7

Post Script

Interview: Yara Khoury, associate producer

Visceral has already accomplished the task of building a sturdy IP, but given the current nature of the triple-A videogame business, remaining a solid financial proposition requires broadening appeal with each new offering. We talk to associate producer **Yara Khoury** to figure out how *Dead Space 3* has attempted to pull off this trick without losing its soul.



The Blade Runner-style urban aesthetic in the opening sequence aboard the lunar colony is a fresh look for *Dead Space*. Why start there?
One of the things we wanted to show was that we're able to innovate and do something different with *Dead Space 3*, while still providing the experience people have come to enjoy so much in *Dead Space 1* and *2*. Then a little later in the game, you find the claustrophobia and dark corners of the flotilla. We're always looking for ways to innovate and engage the player emotionally, and I think the opening section is symbolic of that.

It was a bit jarring to find ourselves in a cover-based shooting sequence. Were you concerned about alienating survival-horror fans?
I think there are very specific elements that make a *Dead Space* game: the horror, thrills, atmosphere, tension and award-winning sound design. All of this we've come to master. We know how to make this a very tightly crafted experience. *Dead Space 2*, for example, is paced a little bit differently, because you have more highs and lows – epic action moments that you didn't have in *Dead Space 1*. But people understood that it didn't take away the horror element. It's the same for *Dead Space 3*. We've brought more ways for players to engage emotionally with the game. I think it makes for a better game, because you don't want it to get repetitive. Even after 10 hours, we still want you to be discovering new mechanics.

Even though *Dead Space 3* is still very much an action game, it seems like you've made a conscious effort to focus more on characters and relationships.
We wanted players to feel a bit like Isaac. In the beginning of the game, he's in his apartment, not bothering anyone, and someone's coming in and dragging him out and telling him, "We need you!" It's like, bam – in your face. We wanted players to feel that sense of, 'What is going on here?' as you fight your way through the lunar colony.

The first time we meet Jacob Danik, it's in a recorded address that feels like it could be delivered by Andrew Ryan. Is that intentional homage?
I see more continuity in terms of what we've done before. The Church Of Unitology has always been there, and it's always been in conflict with the EarthGov entity. In *Dead Space 3*, we give a bit more voice to the Church Of Unitology. Danik is the voice of that church and he's going to explain his intentions. We want players to think, 'What the hell is wrong with these guys? How do they not understand that the Markers are bad for humanity?'

> "We're not taking a stab at any religion in particular. It's just historically that religion has proven to bring war"

The spooky Church Of Unitology is one of the best things about *Dead Space*. Can you talk about how you've developed that aspect of the game and used it to explore themes of religious extremism?
Everything in *Dead Space* is a little bit mystic. Religion and political forces and mysterious things, such as the Markers, that you can't entirely explain – we can build imagination around those things. It's much better for creatives to use these kinds of things, because there's so much more that you can insinuate without having to explain necessarily. That's why religion is a very interesting theme for us. We're not taking a stab at any religion in particular. It's just historically that religion has proven to bring war. We like conflict, because obviously you need conflict in a game, and that's why we chose to focus on it.



In *Dead Space 3*, how have you attempted to make Isaac Clarke a more interesting videogame hero and differentiate him from, say, the Nathan Drakes of this world?
First of all, he's not a hero. He never asked to be one; he never asked to be in the situation we've put him in. When you find him at the beginning of *Dead Space 3*, he doesn't want to be here; he doesn't want to be part of this mission. Plus, Isaac is not a fully good person; he discovers a dark side of himself. And with *Dead Space 3* we explore this side of him, and how dealing with all these atrocities has impacted him in a profound way.

The cinematics in *Dead Space 3* are remarkable. How did you push that aspect of the game forward?
We've improved our motion-capture technology. We doubled the amount of captures on the faces of our characters, so you're going to see a lot more emotions. For example, we now have a technology that's able to track where characters are looking. Where a person is looking tells a lot about what they're feeling and thinking about. So now we have the ability to do that. It was extremely difficult to make cinematics that worked in both singleplayer and co-op. We had to adjust for whether Carver was there or not. So from a design perspective, as well as an implementation perspective, it was a huge challenge. ■

Strike Suit Zero

Publisher Born Ready Games
Developer In-house
Format 360, PS3, PC (version tested)
Release Out now (PC)

Strike Suit Zero is an amalgamation of east and west: its mechanics were germinated in Guildford by indie studio Born Ready Games, but its ships were designed in Japan by renowned mecha artist Junji Okubo. This cultural exchange has spawned a beautiful game, one blessed with cherry blossom pink contrails and rich blue nebulae. But the results of *Strike Suit Zero* provenance aren't merely visual.

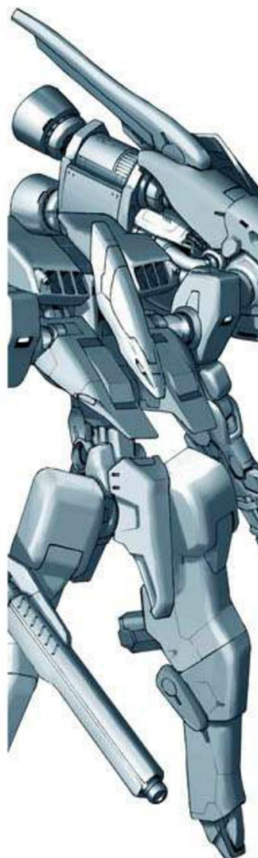
Born Ready Games references classic PC space shooters when talking about its game, resurrecting spectres of *FreeSpace* and *Freelancer*, *X-Wing* and *TIE Fighter* — western games still seen as the pinnacle of a space combat genre scuttled years back. *Strike Suit Zero* nods to those titles via its earnest sci-fi setting, upgradeable ships and an array of weapons with which to outfit your chosen craft, but its closest analogue is as eastern as its artist: *Lylat Wars* (née *Star Fox*).

It has the same arcade flight controls, colourful interpretation of solar system space, and scrolling text attached to passport-photo faceplates as Nintendo's ship-based shooter. It's not like playing *Lylat's* on-rails story missions, however, but rather its free-roaming dogfighting sessions. *Strike Suit Zero*'s camera, as in Nintendo's game, sits far from the cockpit by default, giving a wide, thirdperson field of view. It makes spotting single bogeys positioning themselves on your six fairly easy early on, and shaking solo chasers off is only a little trickier — the result of some mild juking and application of your craft's brake. Danger comes with quantity: the game fills its neon space with wing after wing of enemies, and keeping track of them all is functionally impossible. There's no radar, and the pretty red trails enemies leave aren't always distinct enough to follow in combat. Successfully drop in behind an enemy and things are easy enough, though: the air brake slows you to a crawl, and the turbo-thrusters make it simple to stay on another's tail through evasive manoeuvres.

Tailing a foe and popping their ship like a spiky, superheated tin can stays thrilling for much of *Strike Suit Zero*, but space combat isn't one-note. A secondary weaponset can be picked before a mission, ranging from high-damage dumbfire rockets to enemy-seeking missiles. These weapons are finite, and managing them is key. Hurl fire-and-forget missiles at targets out of their range and they'll fizzle out in the void. But a carefully guided rocket barrage can cripple the flak cannons and plasma guns on a capital ship, leaving it beached like a spacefaring whale, ready to be picked apart by the sharp jabs of your plasma gun.

Smaller, fighter-sized foes start off flimsy when faced with your own weapons, a few shots from your main plasma cannon rending their armoured hulls. Later fighters are tougher, their shielding necessitating a different approach to brute plasma force; instead, use your machine gun to fill the sky with shield-shredding

Tailing a foe and popping their ship like a spiky, superheated tin can stays thrilling for much of Strike Suit Zero



lead, switching to your main armament when your opponent's first layer of protection is gone. It's satisfying, especially given the speed at which machine gun bullets tear through the red bar that indicates shielding, but it's also a little fiddly, with weapon swaps mapped to the D-pad. On a 360, we had to adopt a semi-monkey-claw grip in tense dogfights, reaching down to flip between guns as enemy flak filled the sky. Tweakable controls salve the pain, yet don't change the fact that *Strike Suit Zero* has too many controls to fit truly comfortably on a pad.

A keyboard is a more natural home for the game, requiring less finger-bending to pull off some of its more audacious moves. Joysticks are compatible, but unnecessary, since flying with the mouse is fast and accurate. At least, it is if you don't want to invert. Inexplicably, our review code wouldn't let us flip the Y-axis controls when using a mouse, locking half of gaming's population out of their favoured control scheme. Missing, too, was an in-cockpit viewpoint. Born Ready promises that will be present "very soon" — surely a prerequisite for its stated Oculus Rift version.

Even with a control scheme rebound to your liking, there's a lot to take in. You pick from four vehicles: a balanced fighter craft, a speedy interceptor, a torpedo-toting bomber, and the titular Strike Suit. *Strike Suit Zero*'s title is a tad disingenuous — it's mission three before you get the keys to the mecha-cum-spacejet, and later quests force you back into other cockpits — but the Strike Suit is by far the most enjoyable of the rides on offer. Destroying targets gains you Flux, which in turn enables the suit to transform from flight to mecha mode, a metal humanoid standing on nothingness. Mecha mode comes with special cluster missiles: you have a short time to rake your cursor over as many enemies as possible before firing off an explosive bouquet. From there the Strike Suit folds itself back up and launches back into a dogfight, job hopefully done.

The suit's application isn't immediately obvious. It's easy to blow your chance, transforming out of range of the main fracas and wasting all your Flux on one poor fighter who flew too close. But spend some time in the transformer's clanking boots and a timely mecha-mode switch grows glorious. Sweep through contested airspace and you'll yank a gaggle of AI enemies with you. Boost to escape their short-range weapons, then press A, turn on the spot, rack up 30-odd target locks, and let almost half a hundred missiles fly. The spectacle alone of Tron-esque blue lights chasing red is enough, but the steady tick of target destroyed notifications makes the Strike Suit a pleasure in which to play.

Other craft are orders of magnitude less fun to pilot. The fighter and interceptor are capable dogfighters, but the bomber is best left in the hangar. It's a frustrating



LEFT Born Ready is, at the time of writing, apparently still tweaking the game's difficulty. Smoothing out some of the spikes would make it a more coherent game. **BELOW** Space is rarely less than stunning. *Strike Suit Zero*'s textures and effects are a little muddy, but the macro scale here – with suns, planets, nebulae, and thousands of missiles streaking across the inky skies – more than makes up for it. **BOTTOM** The Strike Suit can pick a capital ship clean of turrets in a few surgical strikes. The skill comes in finding an empty sector of space, giving you the freedom to pick out targets unmolested. Regular ships dodge missiles with an EMP pulse, but the suit has a fiddly dodge move that's straight out of anime



RIGHT Capital ships use beam weapons on each other, reminiscent of strategy classic *Homeworld*. That game's composer – Paul Ruskay – also provides the rousing score for Born Ready's game, doubling up on nods to a major influence





ship to control, being slower and less manoeuvrable than its brethren, and comes armed with a piddly single-shot plasma cannon. Its unique torpedoes are useful for taking down capital ships, but after you've attracted the ire of a swarm of enemy fighters, the bomber's languid turning circle makes it a liability.

You're forced to fly the craft on a first playthrough of the seventh campaign mission (after completing a mission, all ships are available to use in it). This asked us to destroy first capital ship docking stations, and then capital ships themselves. Torpedoes made the task simple – but just as we put the final armament into a stricken cruiser, a cloud of enemy fighters appeared. They aimed a barrage of flak at our bomber, reducing it to so much space wreckage before we could react, let alone escape. After ten-plus retries, each kicking us back to a checkpoint five minutes prior, the only way past was to stand off to one side as our own capital ships picked apart the last cruiser in their own time, leaving us far enough from the swarm about to spawn.

Strike Suit Zero has problems with difficulty. Enemy reinforcements often arrive from varying points in 3D space, and trying to escape them can be nightmarish without a minimap. When you do engage thrusters and try to flee trouble, you'll often find you've merely delayed the inevitable, with a squadron of fighters in tow who are happy enough to kill you in *this* sector of space instead. More frequent checkpointing would assuage some of the frustration – mission seven's spontaneous execution wouldn't be so galling if we didn't have to re-kill four cruisers each time.

We'd also appreciate more competent friendly AI. Your space-friends seem content flying in formation,



LOST IN SPACE

Strike Suit Zero's story is thin. It's 2058 and humans have discovered a strange signal emanating from deep space. Translated, it has taught us how to 'fold' space and get around the galaxy quickly – and colonies, founded with the technology, have demanded self-rule. Earth, in exchange, wants to investigate the signal source. The game's two sides have come to blows as a result of the Colonials revoking Earth's investigation rights, and it's the Earth-based group that players represent. Most memorable is the game's voice acting: it's somehow both tired and incredulous. Its closest touchstone is perhaps a late-era PlayStation 1 voiceover, the results coming across as mistranslated and strained.

ABOVE **You play as Adams, as your copilots loudly remind you. "Adams, they're on you!" is a popular shout. We started to feel a lot like *Modern Warfare 2*'s Ramirez, asked to do everything by incompetent squadmates**

perhaps too stunned by their exhaust trails' beauty to bother trying to shoot anyone. They're enamoured with you, too, attempting to fly alongside you and nuzzling against your ship like a cat demanding a cuddle. *Strike Suit Zero*'s missions have optional parameters and a medal system, rewarding players who can do more in space. It's a conceptually sound system that encourages replays of the half-hour long missions, but is grating in practice. Not because you have to do extra things, but because you have to do everything. Your AI wingmen and women are so useless, they might as well fly home.

There's no command system either, so your braindead pals can't even be pointed towards the thing you want to shoot. Players are stuck juggling in zero gravity, flitting back and forth between side missions and main objectives, trying to avoid gangs of hyper-accurate fighters while protecting idiot colleagues.

That latter task crops up too often. *Strike Suit Zero* asks players to babysit larger craft, destroying incoming torpedoes, fighters, bombers, capital ships and nearby turrets as your charge sits in space like a beautiful rock. The tenth mission is the worst, forcing you to swat an endless stream of stuff targeting your capital ship. Such cheerily incompetent friendlies, the achingly far-spaced checkpoints and countless enemies almost detonate the goodwill *Strike Suit Zero*'s best bits spool up.

Almost. For every scream there's an ace pilot's fist pump, a point where the game's eastern and western influences align to show their best sides. But like its titular star, the game tends to transform, flipping from triumphant to frustrating, and back again.

6

Post Script

Interview: Dan Lodge, lead artist, Born Ready

Dan Lodge is Born Ready's lead artist. He and his team planned out *Strike Suit Zero*'s distinct visual style, incorporating both Japanese and western elements to make a game that sits between the two spheres of influence. We spoke to him about the factors that affected *Strike Suit Zero*'s artistic development.

Why did you decide to make *Strike Suit Zero* look the way it does?
It would be more accurate to say I decided on a philosophy and the look emerged over time. *SSZ* is about huge battles in space, and I wanted the visuals to evoke emotions, to create awe and exhilaration. We often did this through stylisation – things like the glows of fighters… or the coloured energy signatures, red and blue, for the two sides. Other times, we used scale. Our space stations are almost 10km in diameter.

Strike Suit Zero takes visual cues from anime and mecha games. Was its Japanese aesthetic intended from the start of the project?
The key link was Junji Okubo. I'd played *Steel Battalion* and I'd watched *Appleseed*, but Junji was properly introduced to me by Ollie Barder [a game designer and founder of the Mecha Damashii blog]. The three of us had worked together on a pitch before, and Junji had done some drawings that really impressed me. He delivered some great concepts for *Strike Suit Zero* early on and we built on that. But I do think it's important to remember the western influences, too. We all love the look of the *Homeworld* games, and were inspired by some of the very visually impressive sci-fi films that released as we developed the game. Also, [there's] Mike McCain, who painted our cinematics after blowing my mind with a mood piece he did over two years ago now.



"Adding details to Junji's designs and covering them with grittier textures at times felt like sacrilege"



Did you design for a western or eastern audience?
Neither, and both. I like to think distinctive art styles are worth their weight in gold, and I reckon all artists should aspire to develop them. That was some of the thinking behind *Strike Suit*'s ship design. Junji's involvement, too, influenced us. He's a Japanese mecha designer known for being inspired by western designs. That's a bit unusual, and I'm hoping it's something that appeals to both tastes when you combine it with our inspirations in-house.

What do you see as the differences between eastern and western sci-fi?
Art-wise, I think the two styles are closer than ever now. People often use the terms 'Super Robot' and 'Real Robot' when describing mecha. Super Robots are the equivalent of fantasy sci-fi, and Gurren Lagann is a beautiful example that influenced *SSZ*. Real Robots are much more grounded in reality and science, and they're Junji Okubo's forte. They're things like Gundam.

These terms are useful to describe the differences between western and eastern styles of sci-fi art, too. I find western sci-fi design tends to feel more industrial and Real Robot than eastern sci-fi. That's broad brush talking, though, and nowadays it's the surrounding presentation that lends an eastern or western feel.

How do you incorporate them together?
It was tough on *SSZ*, to be honest. Adding details to Junji's designs and covering them with grittier textures at times felt like sacrilege, but in the end I just did what I felt would be best for the game. Characters were the biggest point of contention. I really didn't want to go anime or 'realistic', so I tried to convince the team we would design a cast of iconic helmets as the characters, avoiding the thorny issue of face rendering style. In the end, we ran out of time to experiment and we went with what we have now. I'm actually really pleased with how the characters turned out. A big site out there credited me as the artist who painted them, but I only did the art direction. It was Jamie Clapham at Opus Artz.

How do you design a good spaceship or mecha?
I think you need to define good. With personal work, I'm very much looking at near future mechanical design, the sort of stuff you find in the [hard sci-fi] anime show Planetes. When you see all sorts of recognisable industrial shapes on a design, it starts to feel more plausible in my head. I know this is something that very much appeals to western sci-fi fans.

What is your favourite thing to design?
In hindsight, I realise that I started *SSZ* with a fairly naïve understanding of mechanical design. Over the two years we were in development, I've become obsessed with mechanical design. I now spend many of my evenings designing new mechanical objects: space ships and mecha. I think you'll see some more hard-edged stuff from me in the future, but through a stylised lens.

What are you proudest of in the finished game?
That's a hard question to answer. We are a self-critical art team at Born Ready, and all we see when we look at *SSZ* is room for improvement. We're a small and mostly junior team with tight budgets and we were using brand-new tech built by coders who had the same constraints. That said, I think the guys did a spectacular job, all things considered. I love our interpretation of Earth and Jupiter, and the way our battles look in the distance is even better than I imagined. ■

The Cave

Plundering the depths of *The Cave*'s magical talking grotto is like taking a tour of Ron Gilbert's brain. There's the comedy monkey chasing a banana. There's the hermit turned mad by years trapped alone on a deserted island. There's a New Grog vending machine. It seems inevitable that, deep inside, there's also an old-fashioned adventure game hiding within the modern, puzzle-platformer clothing.

Even *The Cave*'s core mechanic will be familiar to anyone who played Gilbert's *Maniac Mansion*: it offers seven characters, from which you can select any three to take on a spelunking trip. Which three you select partly determines what you encounter on your journey.

At least there are no pirates among them. Players can choose from the Adventurer, the Scientist, the Monk, the Time Traveller, the Knight, the Twins and the Hillbilly. Select the latter and your adventure will include a visit to the carnival where the Hillbilly works, run by a staff of animatronic cutouts. Select the demonic-looking Twins and you'll find their Victorian house, complete with mother, father and dog inside. These disparate places exist inside the Cave, as explained by the Cave itself, because they're the source of whatever those characters most desire.

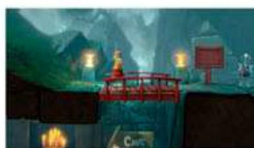
Those desires all turn out to be connected via their dark subject matter; what the Twins want most, for instance, is to murder their parents. Each story is a morality tale, starring characters with human flaws blindly pursuing missions towards some grim end. It's perhaps no accident that there's seven of them.

Navigating *The Cave* requires a combination of simple platforming and only slightly more complicated puzzle solving. At its most basic, a puzzle might involve you pulling a lever to open a gate with one character, then switching to another in order to run through the opening. From there, the challenges expand to include involve special abilities: the Hillbilly can hold his breath indefinitely, the Time Traveller can warp through walls, and the Scientist can hack computer terminals to unlock doors or control machinery. These powers are useful within each character's own area, but for around half the game's length you'll be making your way through parts of the Cave that all the characters encounter. This means the design of challenges can't rely on you having a particular power available, and so for stretches you'll find yourself forgetting that the abilities even exist.

Instead, most of the game's puzzles are solved like in any adventure game: by using or combining the items you find to modify them in some way in order to unlock the next room. You'll use a bucket to collect some water, then use that to catch a lit stick of dynamite. The fuse is immediately extinguished, and the stick can then be safely transported to the rocks blocking your path, before being reignited to clear them.

Publisher Sega
Developer Double Fine
Format 360 (version tested), PS3, PC, Wii U
Release Out now

Solving a puzzle normally means being able to access a new area, and each is lush, detailed and different



NO POINT, NO CLICK
The Cave finds success in carrying forward much of what made adventure games great, while jettisoning the control methods that made them ponderous. The platforming, while trivial, is more engaging than point-and-clicking your way through areas. There's no inventory system, since characters can carry just one item at a time, which makes it easy to forget where you dropped an object, but is still preferable to having pockets full of tat. The only device that we're sad has been left behind is dialogue trees, replaced instead with silent protagonists.

None of the puzzles offer the thrill of a eureka moment in the way that a good puzzle-platformer would. The solution is either immediately obvious, or simple enough that you're more likely to feel dumb for getting stuck than proud for solving it. The best puzzles lie with the Time Traveller, who uses a time machine to switch back and forth between the Jurassic period, the present day and the far future. Yes, it's like *Day Of The Tentacle*: drag a boulder out of position in the past, and it will remain in its new position in the future, your character's skeleton still gripping onto it tightly.

That doesn't mean it's not satisfying to progress with the other characters, but the rewards lie almost solely with the world design. Solving a puzzle normally means being able to access a new area, and each environment is lush, detailed and different from anything that came before. The Twins' house is Tim Burton-esque, all creepy attics, crooked stairs and poisonous green liquids. The Scientist puzzles her way through a military research facility that looks like something out of The Incredibles, with excellent music to match. The Adventurer's adventure, meanwhile, takes her inside a trap-filled Egyptian tomb.

The environments also often contain the best gags, in objects buried in the rock, or signposts and Post-Its stuck to the walls. If you're among those who hold the original *Monkey Island* up as the funniest game ever written, though, you might be disappointed. The Cave narrates your journey with knowing sarcasm, but never says anything worth laughing at. You'll encounter other characters on your journey, each colourful eccentrics, but the dialogue never raises more than a smirk.

Your first playthrough will likely take around four hours to complete, but the idea of having seven characters is that you'll revisit *The Cave* in order to see everyone's journey. Once you know the solutions and have seen the sight gags, however, it's much quicker to play through the shared areas, such as that aforementioned deserted island. But this also means half of your second session will be spent in a fugue state, trudging across levels to perform trivial tasks.

A third playthrough is necessary if you want to see the seventh character's segment, but that means taking two previously completed characters with you. It's unlikely you'll find it worthwhile, unless you have a couple of co-op partners to journey with. It's local multiplayer only, but the drudgery lifts as soon as you have an extra pair of hands to fetch an item for you.

Approached as the latest work from one of the industry's favoured fathers, *The Cave* could seem like a tourist trap, packed with old ideas to lure in passers-by. Taken for what it is – a simple, characterful adventure game from an independent developer – it offers just enough to be worth the price of admission.

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ABOVE *The Cave*'s environments are bathed in streaming light and soft shadows, rendered with painterly textures, and populated by Pixar-style character design, all of which is exemplified by this king's throne room



TOP *The Cave*'s original design had Indiana Jones-style characters, and some of that spirit survives in the Adventurer's Egyptian-themed tomb raiding section, where traps must be carefully navigated using all of your chosen characters. **ABOVE** Although set inside a cave, it's rarely dark or dank inside. Each character's section opens up with high ceilings and distant views, as in the Monk's mountain home. **RIGHT** Objects in the gameworld are highlighted with descriptions, such as these levers. Sometimes they're used to deliver jokes, as with the game's many descriptions for fire torches, but too often they're missed opportunities



Post Script

Interview: Ron Gilbert, creator

Ron Gilbert's first full game, *Maniac Mansion*, came out when he was just 23. At 26, *The Secret of Monkey Island* cemented a lifelong reputation. Here Gilbert, now almost 50, discusses the challenges of expanding the genre that he helped create.



You came up with the concept for *The Cave* a long time ago; what was the original idea?
It was before I was at LucasArts that I started thinking about it, and it was originally about three characters who went into a sentient cave looking for something. They were these Indiana Jones rip-off characters, and I really wasn't thinking about it as an adventure game back then. It was more an environmental puzzle game.

Why make *The Cave* control like a platformer?
I went back and I played a lot of the old adventure games. I played *Maniac Mansion* and *Monkey Island*, and the thing that really struck me was how boring moving around the world was. I would spend a lot of time just clicking and waiting for the guy to walk. If you had to transition through five or six screens to get somewhere, it was just click and wait and wait and wait, and click and wait and wait and wait. That's when I thought I had an opportunity to make traversal through the world fun.

"I wanted the characters to be silent, because I wanted there to be this unease about why these characters were here "

Do you still think of *The Cave* as being an adventure game, rather than a platformer?
I don't think it's a platform game at all. I think it's purely an adventure game, because if you really like platformers, it has none of those things; it doesn't have timing jumps, or double jumps and combo jumps. It's not something you have to learn. [The platforming is] to make moving around the world fun, and that's it.

If it's not point-and-clicking, what defines an adventure game for you?
It's interesting that people do call them point-and-click, because when *Maniac Mansion* came out, people said it wasn't an adventure game because it didn't have a parser… To me, an adventure game isn't about its control scheme. To me, it's a game about story, with puzzles, and they're the thing that pulls the story along. And then there's just a certain style of puzzle that's in an adventure game. I don't have a good way to quantify it, but *Limbo* has a lot of puzzles in it, and I don't consider any of them to be adventure game puzzles.

Why does *The Cave* abandon dialogue trees, one of the traditional staples of adventure games?
That was a very conscious decision. I love dialogue trees, and I think they still have a place in modern adventure games, but I wanted the characters to be silent, because I wanted there to be this unease about why these characters were here.



Was it harder to write silent protagonists?
It was definitely harder, because you don't have those dialogue trees to just bluntly give out information. One thing I had was the Cave himself, and he could talk, and he became the main mechanism for telling the story of the game. I'd never written a narrator-based game and that was a big challenge. I went through several revisions of the script.

In the first version of the game, the Cave talked to himself. He wasn't talking to the player; it was just this internal monologue. I eventually scrapped that, because I really felt there was no way to make a connection, and I went through a rewrite where he assumes that there is this lawyer watching everything and he talks to them.

Why did you want to tell such dark stories?
I've always been fascinated with characters who are just broken. I thought that would be fun creatively to write for. It's a lot of fun to create characters who have some horrible part of them. On the other hand, you still want people to relate to them, so that's just a fun creative challenge.

So how do you make horrible characters relatable?
The best way is to start out slowly. Scene one is not them murdering their parents, because then you would just hate them from the beginning. But you slowly bring that around to the process. So you may find a character, and 'Hey, this is my favourite character, he's so adorable, I love all this about him,' and he just slowly starts to do things that you're like, 'Wow, that's really horrible.'

The art style seems intrinsic to that.
It was a lot of work for the animators, because these characters don't talk, and so every piece of information about their personality had to come out of animation. Even down to the Twins – the way they help each other climb up ropes and ladders. You get the sense that they really love each other, because they're helping each other out in everything. Or the Knight, when he stands, he just looks afraid the whole time.

Do you think you'd use Kickstarter in future?
Yeah. I look at things like Kickstarter not as the new way to fund games, but as just another way to fund games. There's always been going to publishers, or there's been venture capitalists, or there's been angel financing. Kickstarter's just another way to go about that. But any way you raise money, it comes with upsides and downsides. ■

Persona 4 Golden

Publisher NIS America Europe
Developer Atlus
Format Vita
Release February 22 (EU retail), February 20 (EU digital), out now (US, JP)

You spend much of your time in *Persona 4 Golden* at school, but you only ever see the good bits. A couple of times a week, you might answer a teacher's question and get an instant stat boost; sometimes you'll hear a few sentences at the start of a class before the screen fades to black. The focus is on morning walks, lunch breaks and after-school clubs: your chances to make new friends and hang out with existing ones. If only our school days were like this.

It's entirely appropriate, however, because this is a game whose focus is squarely on friendship. Your every relationship, or Social Link, is ranked from zero to ten, and everything you do in company – a shared bento box, a stroll on the local flood plains, an after-school kickabout, or an evening tending to your vegetable garden – works towards increasing that rank. Each Social Link relates to a specific kind of Persona, the spirits you summon in battle, and the higher the relevant Social Link rank, the more potent the Persona created. It gives real meaning, and tangible benefit, to attending to the minutiae of a Japanese schoolkid's daily life, which only gets interesting in a traditional JRPG sense when fog descends on the sleepy town of Inaba. Because when the fog comes, people go missing. And when people go missing here, they often turn up dead.

It starts with an urban myth. Legend has it that the Midnight Channel shows your soulmate when the clock strikes 12 on a rainy night. That channel, you soon find out, is very real indeed – only it's not showing your ideal life partner, but the most recent person to go missing. Reach out to touch the screen of the small portable TV in your bedroom, and your hand disappears inside. When you try again on a giant flatscreen at Junes, the local department store, your entire body falls through and into another dimension. Here, missing persons await you, trapped within sprawling, multi-tier dungeons, prisoners of their own psyches. You must rescue them so they can acknowledge the parts of themselves that they'd tried to hide away. If they can admit to their true nature, they'll be able to call on a Persona of their own, and can join you in battle.

While your party members have just one Persona each, you have several options, and can switch between them at any point in the game's turn-based battles. Enemies are weak against certain attacks. Use the right one and they fall down, letting you attack again. Fell the entire enemy team and your party joins forces for an All-Out Attack, piling on and dealing heavy damage. That, though, is as nuanced as the fighting gets. You and your party level up, increasing hit and skill points (the latter depleted by Persona attacks); Personas level up, too, learning new skills as they go, and up to six can be fused together to create new, far more powerful ones. There's loot to take from fallen enemies, and from chests littered about the place. So far, so JRPG.

Everything you do has the same message: being nice makes you stronger – and making new friends makes you stronger still



Things have, however, been greatly improved from *Persona 4*'s original PlayStation 2 form (see **E**198), and we don't just mean that the visuals are sharper. Find the stairs to the next tier of a dungeon and you're free to scope out the rest of the current floor without backtracking, your ascent now a quick menu selection away. Die in battle and instead of restarting from your last save point, you respawn at the start of the floor on which you fell. Where *Persona 4* was obtuse, *Golden* goes out of its way to help: the Shuffle Time mechanic, which gives you a choice of stat-boosting cards at the end of some battles, has been overhauled, and now has the decency to tell you what each card will do before you select it. Fusing Personas is perhaps the game at its most complex, but this, too, is patiently explained. You're now able to choose which skills created Personas inherit from their forebears, making the cancel-retry loop of the original game a thing of the past. On top of the gameplay tweaks sits a fine suite of extras, including the soundtrack, footage from two Persona Live concerts, and short recaps of events in earlier titles in the series.

As thoughtful an update as this is, what really stands out is how ideally suited it is to portable play. *Persona 4 Golden*'s core events take place on the morning commute, at lunchtime, and in late afternoons through to evenings – the very times of day when we play games, and, evenings aside, the times when we tend to rely on mobile devices for quick fixes in snatched spare moments. Time moves faster in Inaba, of course. Unless you're in a dungeon, you can get through a day or two in-game in ten minutes, boosting a couple of Social Link ranks and making yourself, and your allies, more powerful in the process. When you are in a dungeon-crawling mood, you're only a tap of Vita's power button away from a break. There's no anxious hunting for save points, and no fear of losing progress. As great as the PS2 game was, it's hard to believe it was ever designed with extended sessions in mind.

Persona 4 Golden has the warmest of hearts. Like the *Yakuza* series, it's a game about helping people, whether it's keeping your young cousin company while her policeman father is out investigating the murders you're working to solve, or helping a problem teen come to terms with his sexuality. And if you're feeding a friend the answer to a teacher's question or saving the life of another teen from an otherworldly dungeon, everything you do has the same message: being nice makes you stronger. Making new friends – and better friends of the ones you already have – makes you stronger still. That's quite the social message for such a singleplayer game, but *Persona 4 Golden* is full of surprises. Perhaps the biggest is that a console JRPG is so well suited to portable play, and that a four-year-old PS2 game is, by some distance, Vita's best game to date.

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LEFT All-Out Attacks, preceded by these quick manga flashes, are more than a quick way of finishing battles. Winning with one triggers Shuffle Time, dealing you a hand of cards that may boost stats, award chest keys, or level up Personas. **BELOW** Your guide through the TV world is Teddie, a top-heavy cuddly bear whose head unzips to reveal he's hollow. He locates the dungeons where missing persons are trapped. **BOTTOM** Each abductee appears on the Midnight Channel, but as their shadow self. This, like the whole Persona concept, is a nod to Jungian psychology: the part of ourselves we wish people wouldn't see



ABOVE *Persona 4 Golden* is so packed full of things to do that we wouldn't have been surprised to find a full-on football sim when we joined the soccer club. Like everything else, it's just another way to make new friends





Sly Cooper: Thieves In Time

What's a thief's most important talent? Well, the ability to stay undetected is clearly paramount, though developer Sanzaru – taking the reins from Sucker Punch after its HD renovation of Sly's PS2 trilogy – doesn't always subscribe to the notion that its band of burglars should stay out of sight. Combat is rarely advisable against *Thieves In Time*'s larger enemies, even with a fully upgraded skillset, but hippo powerhouse Murray is the sledgehammer to Sly's scalpel, pummelling his way through bad guys in a cathartic release from sneaking.

Forced stealth does feature, but the fail conditions are consistent and clearly delineated. Make a noise near guards and you're in trouble; stray into a moving light source, be it a guard's lantern or a searchlight, and you'll be caught. Otherwise, guards are predictably dumb, and the better for it. Staying off the ground is explicitly advised, with glowing surfaces producing a breadcrumb trail of light to show the path of least resistance, but you can often muddle through if you mistime a leap.

But the secret of Sanzaru's success is that *Thieves In Time* prizes another of Sly's assets: unpredictability. The game's individual systems may be unremarkable in their own right, but such is their variety that you're rarely given the chance to scrutinise them. You're never doing one thing for very long, and if the developer recycles just about every new concept it introduces, there's usually a new twist or fresh context that makes the familiar feel different. It's been some time since we've seen a game that's so generous with its ideas.

Not all are winners: the minigame interludes that use Vita's gyro sensor or touchscreen are rarely exciting, and there even occasionally frustrating moments, such as the costume change icon, which doesn't always respond immediately to a jabbing thumb. Yet such is the restless desire to keep moving on that these irritations are soon forgotten. After all, the next segment might just be a Rocky-style training montage that quickly cuts between a game of Whac-A-Mole and a sumo wrestling bout with an obese prehistoric penguin, or a rhythm-action sequence that sees a hip-shaking hippo distracting guards in a geisha disguise.

Indeed, we wonder if the time travel plot is simply to allow Sanzaru to lob more ingredients into the melting pot. Each new world offers the chance to rescue and then play as one of Sly's ancestors, from a muscular Neanderthal to a nimble sushi chef, with missions tailored around their abilities. Though objectives differ, the structure is broadly similar, with quests pilfering a number of the best heist movie standards; you might begin with a bit of photographic reconnaissance, followed by retrieving items from a shopping list, then perhaps a pursuit combined with a little eavesdropping.

Yet there's always the potential for surprise. Mistakes are made, and plans go awry: one mission has

Publisher SCE
Developer Sanzaru Games
Format PS3, Vita (version tested)
Release February 5 (NA), March 27 (EU)

Objectives differ, but the structure is broadly similar, with quests pilfering from the best heist movie standards



a false ending, while an unexpected hitch in a meticulously arranged strategy results in the wrong character fighting the boss – in a rhythmic memory test on ice skates, naturally. The script may not be as funny as it thinks it is, though in the face of such invention even the most groansome gags and lame puns add to the freewheeling, ramshackle charm.

Those who find themselves exhausted by the game's apparent attention deficit disorder have the chance to slow the pace by exploring the expansive environments. The worlds may be variations on familiar themes, but they're colourful and skilfully constructed, with rails to grind, hooks to swing from, and air cylinders to ride with the help of a portable parachute. There's a deep attention to visual detail, perhaps best exemplified by the mission in which you're asked to deface posters of a corrupt sheriff: each graffitied embellishment is different, even though you only see it for a few seconds.

Waypoints are thankfully absent, so you'll have to rely on natural curiosity to discover all the hidden collectables, rather than trekking to a map marker à la *Assassin's Creed*. It's worth taking the time to locate and ascend the tallest peak, though, since you can pull out your binoculars to spot distant treasures and then race them back to your hideout against a tight time limit to claim a cash bonus. Locate all the clue bottles in a world and you can also open a safe for an extra surprise. There's plenty to keep you occupied, in other words, but this is a substantial game even if you stick to the script.

Thieves In Time is such a pleasure to play for the vast majority of its healthy runtime that its problems are all the more disappointing. Some players will inevitably tire of the game's hyperactivity, particularly in the rare moments where a new addition falls flat, and there's some noticeable artifacting in the otherwise excellent cartoon cutscenes, which bizarrely come without subtitles, even if you have them enabled from the pause menu. The biggest issue, however, is that the load times are excessively long and, coupled with the occasionally indulgent narrative interruptions, this is to the clear detriment of the game's pacing. It's a particular issue on a portable platform.

Still, Sanzaru's heroic efforts do enough to earn our patience. Its game may rarely do anything you haven't seen done better elsewhere, but the developer knots a slew of disparate elements together with no little skill, leaving the whole feeling irresistibly fresh. Fittingly, given the time travel theme at its core, it feels like the product of a different era, one before focus testing began to gradually sand down games' rough edges, often diminishing their personalities in the process. Perhaps, after all, a thief's most important quality is charisma – and, for all his faults, you can't deny this roguish racoon still has that in spades.

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ABOVE You earn money by defeating enemies and smashing breakable objects, but the best way is to pick a guard's pocket. Often you'll get no more than cash, but from time to time you'll discover a more valuable item







TOP Boss battles are inventive but a couple outstay their welcome, with one in particular requiring a costume change that takes a split second too long. The multi-character mission that precedes it, however, is a thrilling standout. **ABOVE** Thirdperson platformers tend to have camera issues, but Sanzaru's is gold tier, very rarely offering an unhelpful or obstructive viewpoint, while zooming out when necessary for cinematic framing. **LEFT** *Thieves In Time*'s vocal performances are uniformly excellent, and its characterisation is strong, even if the actors can't find a way to make the script's bad jokes any funnier. The soundtrack is equally worthy of praise, offering up an eclectic range of themes

Proteus

The only constant in *Proteus* is its very beginning. You awake in water with only a chunkily drawn sun for company. Squint and you'll see the outline of a landmass on the horizon. As you walk towards it, that vague outline begins to take shape; it's an island you're about to explore for the first time, even if you've played *Proteus* a hundred times before. And when you've seen enough – when you hold the Escape key to slowly close your eyes and return to the main menu – you'll never see that same island again.

After your first playthrough, the islands will always be familiar, though. You'll always arrive at springtime, when blocky cherry trees shed their rectangular blossoms onto lush green grass. Animals will bound or scurry away when you get too close. The island will forever have a slightly distorted sense of scale – trees are half as tall as mountains, whose summits you can reach in seconds. Rain clouds hang low to the ground, and you'll frequently find yourself above them, looking down on a blanket of nimbus. The individual elements of David Kanaga's sonic palette are fixed, too; every tree, animal, raindrop and flower has its own specific sound that plays as you draw near. But designer Ed Key's algorithm spits *Proteus*'s component parts out in a different order every time it loads.

So, yes, this world is procedurally generated, but you'll spend much of your time walking up hill and down dale wondering how much of it is truly random. The vague circle of standing stones on a distant mountaintop could conceivably be a happy procedural accident, but the lone gravestone on the edge of a clifftop that directly faces the rising sun? It's just too perfect. Surely that's a designer's hand at work, not fate's. Yet during our many visits to Key and Kanaga's island, we've only seen it once. And that's the point of *Proteus*, really. You can see everything the island has to offer in an hour – once you've grown to understand how it works, in fact, you can see it in a fraction of that time – yet it retains the capacity to surprise.

This is a solitary experience, but not a lonely one. You're the only person around – assuming you're human, that is, something you take for granted in firstperson games, but which you'll later have reason to question – but you clearly aren't the first. The ground didn't stomp these paths into itself, the trees didn't build those hilltop forts, and we doubt there are squirrels buried beneath those gravestones.

But you're not here to learn about some ancient civilisation, and you're subtly, but quite deliberately, discouraged from paying too much attention to where mankind has left its mark. The crude, spiky forts are intimidating even from a distance, a stark, unwelcoming contrast to the inviting pastel skies. Stray too close and they cut through the gently tinkling electronica with a repetitive, discordant fanfare, played on crudely

Publisher Ed Key and David Kanaga
Developer In-house
Format Mac, PC (tested)
Release Out now

This is a solitary experience, but not a lonely one. You're the only person around... but you clearly aren't the first



PICTURE PERFECT
As keen as you'll be to see what's around the corner, you'll find yourself stopping frequently to take the perfect photo, or 'postcard' in the game's vernacular. If you're like us, you'll soon find yourself controlling the game using only the mouse – left-click to move forward, right-click to retreat – letting your free hand hover over F9, the screenshot key. Your creations are stored in a folder labelled Postcards; in your operating system's file browser, they're static JPEGs, but load them from the main menu and you're in for a wonderful surprise, which we won't ruin.

emulated MIDI bagpipes. You'll walk away in a hurry. Later, you'll find a cabin. Approach and it makes no sound, which in this world makes it almost entirely pointless. It's as if *Proteus* is asking why, in a once-in-a-lifetime visit to paradise, you'd want to walk into walls.

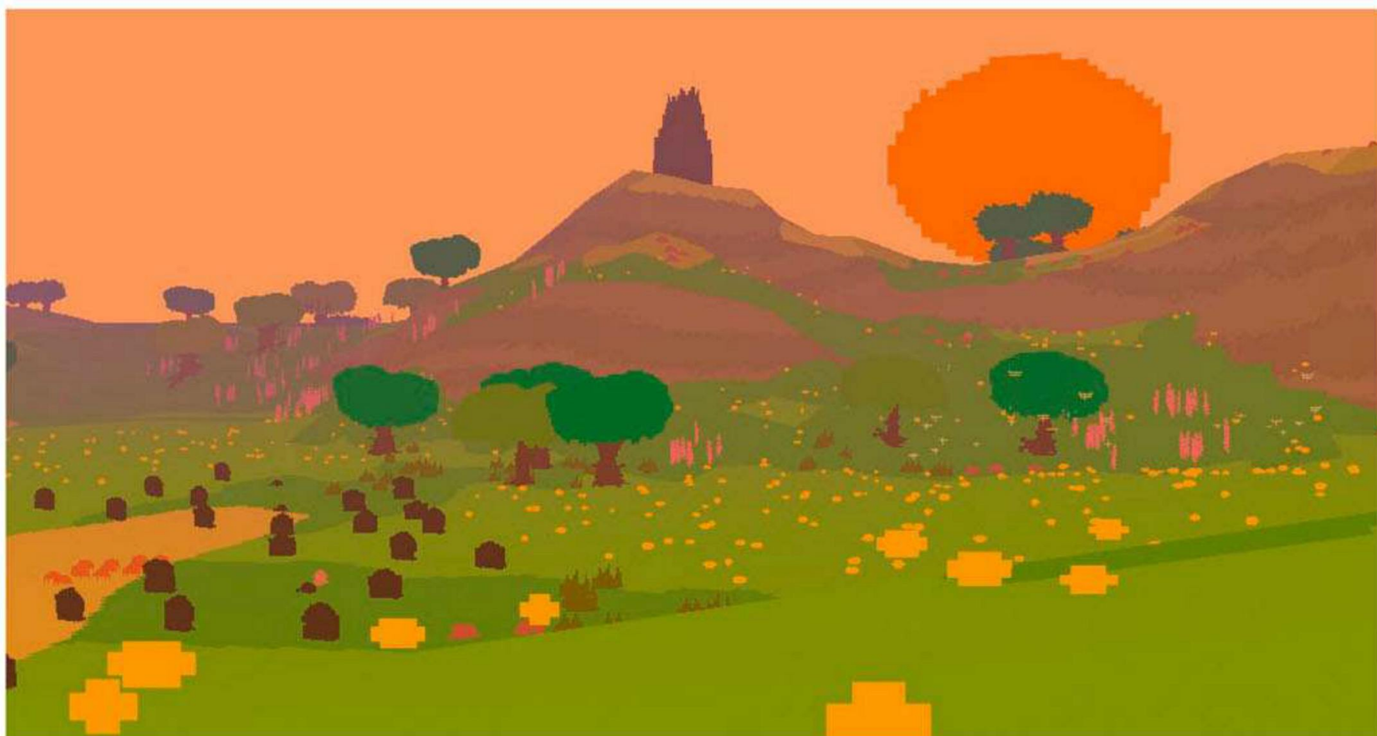
There are those who claim *Proteus* isn't a game, and those who took offence at the limits of *Journey*'s interactivity will find even less to like here. But there are systems at work – a day/night cycle, changeable weather, and the path to trigger the change in seasons, which we won't spoil here – as well as myriad secrets. You'll find tree groves that light up in your presence in the middle of the night, and animals that peek curiously round trunks then disappear from view, inviting you to give chase. Stand still just before triggering the change from one season to the next and you'll see days and nights pass in seconds, the sun racing across the sky in an instant, shooting stars passing by in a flash, like a time-lapse sequence in a nature documentary.

In fact, for all that *Proteus* is a game of exploration, it's at its best when you're still. Progress too eagerly through a forest packed with trees, flora and animals, and all that instrumentation rubs up awkwardly against itself; it's not quite a cacophony, but a little busy. Stand still and you can appreciate the intricacy of the sonic palette. Soft little loops form, but subtly shift as time passes, the clouds drifting overhead while the sun slowly falls towards the horizon. Push forwards and it sounds like an electronic orchestra tuning up. You'll need to stand still if you want to hear a song.

It's hypnotic and dreamlike, relaxing to the point of soporific, but not without its frustrations. Even when you know the secret of the transition between seasons, it can be awkward to trigger, and what ought to be a helpful guiding hand can often send you vacillating around the same small patch of land. And while the music hits peaks and troughs at different times of day, it never truly gets going, with only one of four seasons backed by the beat of a drum – though you suspect Brian Eno, ambient music pioneer and an obvious influence here, would rather like it as it is.

With a defined beginning, four distinct seasonal environments and an affecting, surprising conclusion, there's no question that *Proteus* is a game. But if there's one concern, it's whether this is an island that's worth revisiting once you've seen all it has to offer. In a way, its lack of progression – the absence of skill trees, difficulty levels and save points – works in its favour; you won't dive back in to mop up the last few achievements, or to climb leaderboards, but simply because you want to play *Proteus*. Because you want to open your eyes and be up to your waist in seawater, to walk to shore and wander through fields that sing. And that's an itch only *Proteus* can scratch.

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ABOVE See what we mean about those forts? They're a commanding presence, and if you haven't got the message that you're to steer clear of them by the time autumn rolls round, you're given a firm, wildly psychedelic reminder.
RIGHT These flying creatures are a recurring presence, though they take a different form in each season and it may take some time for you to connect the dots



BELOW Autumn's colours are intentionally a little washed out, so thank heavens for purple leaves. Key has described the game's graphics as 1bit, but here the ground recalls nothing so much as some 8bit colour clash





ABOVE *Proteus* is never exactly a hectic affair, but it's easily at its most peaceful at night, when most of the animals are fast asleep and even the trees keep quiet for a change, save for the occasional creaking branch

Kentucky Route Zero: Act I

Publisher Cardboard Computer
Developer In-house
Format Mac, PC
Release Out now

Conway, a furniture delivery man, is looking for 5 Dogwood Drive, a house on a road that doesn't exist on his map. Nor does Route Zero, the highway he's told will lead him to it. So starts the first episode of a graphic adventure that follows his dreamlike journey through a landscape that's more about a state of mind than homeware distribution. And although it's driven by a point-and-click interface and text choices, it's an adventure that avoids puzzles in favour of rich storytelling.

Cardboard Computer's vision of a '50s-style Gothic American Midwest is transfixing, mixing everyday rural backwaters with fantastic imagination. Take the giant horse head that makes up the facade of the Equus Oils gas station, and how it's transformed as you see it lit in turn by the setting sun and cold fluorescent lights. Or take the way the scene pans up the hill from the road as Conway climbs towards an old farmhouse, then how the wall cuts away as he enters the front door. The camera goes on to zoom in, through the building, to frame the view beyond. This is a game that sees the beauty in the graphic adventures of old and wishes to build on them.

The game's locations are presented in polygons shaded with flat colours and gradients, with details such as telegraph wires or a rocking chair's frame picked out in sharp pixels. Elegant, atmospheric and finely composed, the design avoids nostalgic gaming cliché, while celebrating the fundamental nature of our medium's graphics: pixels and colour. It's also backed by an understated but enveloping audio landscape of wind, cicadas and Conway's ever-idling truck, as well as occasional washes of electronica and even bluegrass.

Kentucky Route Zero is also informed by text adventures, with descriptions supporting the visuals, and multiple choice dialogue articulating the strange characters Conway meets as he tries to find the delivery address for his goods. There's Marquez, a practically minded TV repair woman; Equus Oils' oracular attendant; and Weaver, a sad ex-mathematician who knows a curiously large amount about Conway.

But while its graphic imagery is poetic, the text itself can seem wilfully obscure, as if the writing is struggling to keep up with the game's deft visual strangeness. Perhaps it's down to having to squeeze short descriptions or lines of dialogue into the few words the text box can spare, but the writing often hits notes of disjointed surrealism rather than something more subtle, grasping for the dreamlike state the art style seems to effortlessly achieve. The contrast is disappointing, and the sheer abstract nature of it all can feel like listening to someone else's dreams: meaningful to the person who experienced them, but disconnected and hollow to the rest of us.

That said, in the second half of the episode – which will take at least an hour in total if you take the care to absorb its details – the text and overall plotting start to work more successfully. Conway's background starts to be revealed; you begin to learn about the history and significance of the characters he meets, as well as the locations he visits; and motifs, such as a troupe of musicians and one-sided conversations with Conway's dog, start to reiterate and give the narrative structure.

The world becomes expanded, too, once you take your truck to a black-and-white road map of the region and then freely follow its roads with the aid of vague directions ("left at the burning tree") that you've been told might lead you to Route Zero. And knowing the mysterious power of maps, Cardboard Computer also rewards you if you opt to tour the backroads, where you'll discover extra locations, such as an abandoned church where you hear scratchy hymns blaring over an old tape player. These places are entirely described through text, supported by audio over the top.

The vision of a '50s-style Gothic Midwest is transfixing, mixing rural backwaters with fantastic imagination

Not that there's any mechanical payoff to visiting them. Being a story more than a game, *Kentucky Route Zero* doesn't have you finding objects in order to use them on other objects, or carefully navigating dialogue options to find out information. An early sequence, for instance, plays with your expectations, asking you to figure out the password to a character's computer. But rather than follow clues, you follow an associative poem, and whatever you pick, you'll have guessed right.

Such scenarios might not present challenge, but they always aim to flesh out Conway's journey. Moreover, the looseness with which the choices are presented gives you the sense that Conway's story is your story. There's a quiet but highly effective innovation here, too, in exposing hints of a character but also allowing you to gently shape it, if only in your own mind, through the dialogue options you have to choose from. Early on, the garage attendant asks you your dog's name, and you can pick between two names and not knowing its name at all, establishing a relationship that's down to the character you want to sculpt.

Such choices don't only concern dialogue. In the same way that you'll find extra locations if you take the time to explore the roads, *Kentucky Route Zero* rewards you if you play around with the interactive elements it provides. Without wanting to spoil the surprise, always try switching the light on and off in dark places.

So what does it all mean? With four episodes to go, *Kentucky Route Zero* isn't going to let go of its secrets just yet. As a taster of its world – and of Cardboard Computer's command of a transfixing graphical style as well as a progressive storytelling technique – this first segment is potent, but it's difficult not to hope that its deliberate dreaminess will end up coalescing into something more substantial. A little less magic and a little more realism, perhaps.

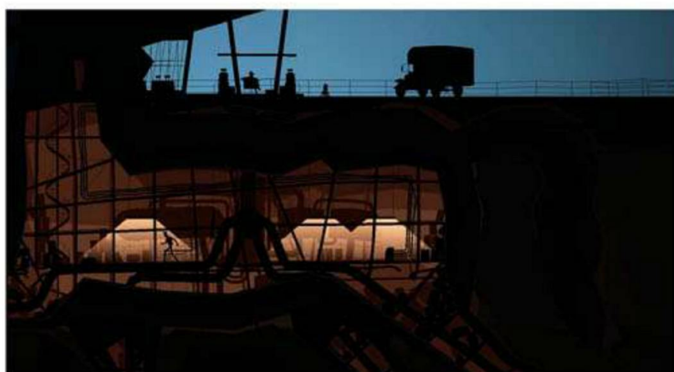
8



CONVERSATION CHARTER
Cardboard Computer, the collective name for duo Jake Elliott and Tamas Kemenczy, first experimented with *Kentucky Route Zero's* narrative style in a previous game called *Ruins*. It featured the tragic story of a relationship told through a dog's dreams as it chases rabbits, and the nature of the multiple choices in its conversations flesh out the yarn, even if you don't select them, by simple virtue of the fact they're listed. It's a highly efficient way of hinting at ideas without having to make players dwell upon the details, and the technique grants both games a sense of greater depth.

RIGHT The dialogue can read as if it's trying too hard to be obscure, wobbling on the tightrope between surreal and silly. We're not yet sure if the game has a sense of humour. **BELOW** The view smoothly zooms, pans and turns to take you into, below, or up locations. This lends them a coherent and discrete feel. **BOTTOM** The game's interface is beautifully elegant, with panels that offer interaction options fading into view as Conway approaches. The downside is that when he isn't close, you won't know what you can examine or use







ABOVE At the point at which you click to walk your character around the game's locations, a thin stick appears and a horseshoe spins around it. It's a playful little touch in some otherwise rather melancholy environments



Antichamber

Barely 30 seconds in and *Antichamber* has lied to us, suggesting we jump over a gap that not only looks impassable, but is. The solution, we find out when we work our way back up, is to walk off the edge and watch as a bridge forms beneath us. It's just the first of many little tricks this game pulls. This is a world where staircases end on the floor they began; where you can fall four floors and find yourself staring through a window at where you just stood; where you turn your back on something, look around, and find that it's gone.

The clue's in the name: this is perhaps best thought of as the anti-puzzle game. Rather than learning a set of mechanics and then using them to solve increasingly challenging puzzles, *Antichamber*'s opening is a struggle to make sense of a world that makes no sense at all. The only help you're given are some chalk drawings dotted about the place, which, when clicked on, reveal nuggets of fortune-cookie-like wisdom. ("The end may come before we were ready to get there," one intones.) Some teach you lessons about the preceding trap or puzzle, while others refer to the next one, but neither kind is especially helpful and both frequently come off as smug.

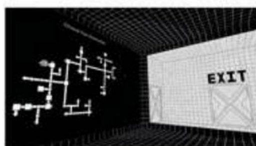
Developer Alexander Bruce clearly delights in messing with your head and thrills in letting you know about it, especially in the early stages, where a fresh migraine awaits around every non-Euclidean corner. The only mechanic is there are no mechanics, besides a jump button, which you're rather wary of using after the opening. Each chamber has its own rules, and so before you can consider a solution you'll have to establish what the problem is. It's frighteningly smart stuff.

Despite a bold start, *Antichamber* can't resist eventually becoming a videogame, introducing a gun-like tool that sucks up and fires off coloured blocks. Each room's rules are now underpinned by a consistent set of mechanics: using blocks as keys to open doors, to hold moving objects in place, or to fashion rudimentary ladders. There are four guns in all, each new one collected opening up previously inaccessible paths.

It's a Metroidvania game, then, one that falls foul of its own design as you struggle to find your way back to a specific place in a world with an elastic interpretation of 'back'. You can fast travel using the map in the pause menu, but doing so resets a puzzle to its original, unsolved state, and strips you of your supply of precious blocks. It's a world that's all too easy to get lost in, and if that sounds like faint praise, it's with good reason. *Antichamber* is many things – a remarkable technical achievement, a smart subversion of its genre, a game that plays you as much as you play it – but you're more likely to respect it than enjoy it.

6

Publisher Alexander Bruce
Developer In-house
Format PC
Release Out now



PAUSE PRINTS

All of the helper signs you've found so far are displayed on a wall in the pause menu, which is, appropriately enough, a chamber. On another wall, you'll find diagrams explaining the controls, and a timer ticking down from 90 minutes that adds a sense of urgency to proceedings. A third holds the game's map – useful for fast travelling, useless for getting your bearings – while the fourth wall is a tantalising window onto an exit door.

BELOW ***Antichamber*** **doesn't go in for much pure platforming, but these boxes must be pushed around to help you reach an exit. There's no room for improvisation, the force field vaporising blocks stored in your gun**



Joe Danger Touch

Publisher Hello Games
Developer In-house
Format iOS
Release Out now

When playing the new touchscreen version of *Joe Danger* correctly, it should appear to the casual observer as though you're giving your iOS device the most hyperactive, bruising massage ever administered. Tap the starting line to send Joe's stunt motorcycle rumbling on its merry sidescrolling way, at which point the bike clips along on its own steam as if the throttle's stuck. From then on it's a mad flurry of gestures. Tap to jump. Swipe in various directions, both on the ground and in the air, to perform a host of stunts that increase your score and combo multiplier. It's a testament to how seamlessly Hello Games has integrated the various gestures that you get a solid handle on them after just a few minutes of play.

Joe Danger's trademark colour scheme looks particularly stunning on Retina-capable displays, and the *Mario* influence hardly ends there. Hills have smiley faces. There are half-buried horizontal green pipes to ride through. Even the animation of your collected badges unlocking a new set of tracks sounds like star bits filling up a Hungry Luma.

The only sour note is the way the game keeps even the most skilled players at a severe leaderboard disadvantage until they've unlocked – or purchased – the final playable character. Using Golden Joe applies a 200 per cent bonus to your score and coins accrued, and raises the maximum combo multiplier from the starting character's x5 to a staggering x50. It's hard to imagine Miyamoto ever stooping that low.

8



Hundreds

Publisher Semi Secret Software
Developer In-house
Format iOS
Release Out now

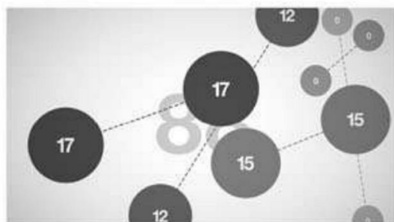
Hundreds is an astoundingly harmonious mix of art and design. It's a game about circles and the spaces between them, so aesthetically pared down that even the iOS standard corner-hogging pause button has been excised. Restarts only come after failure, though failure comes easy enough.

Touch a circle floating slowly or zipping rapidly around one of *Hundreds*' levels and it'll inflate, a digit in its centre ticking upwards as it does so. When the total of all your pumped-up circles reaches 100, the level is won. Normally, circles bounce lazily off one another like billiard balls in perpetual motion, but should the expanding circumference of an inflating circle come into contact with another circle or object, the level is lost.

It's a simple premise, with subversions and twists (linked circles that must be pressed together, whirring gears that deflate your circles) adding occasional moments of time pressure to levels that can otherwise be taken at your own pace. It's perhaps too much a test of patience rather than dexterity on occasion, given success can hinge upon seizing the moment a single untouched circle is knocked away from the pack.

These freeform levels are interspersed with more tightly locked-down puzzles with prescribed solutions, lending an unusual sense of pace. The presence of a set of arcane codes and ciphers, meanwhile, might have done the same if they were a little less peripheral and obscure. Handsomely uncluttered, this is a modish, elegant puzzler.

7



Wave Trip

Publisher Lucky Frame
Developer In-house
Format iOS
Release Out now

Edinburgh's Lucky Frame continues to forge an original path through the untamed wilds of the App Store, melding traditional game mechanics with procedurally generated music. If *Wave Trip* feels a little more conventional than previous efforts *Pugs Luv Beats* and *Bad Hotel*, that's perhaps because it's the most convincing marriage of the two ideas the studio has managed to date.

As with *Bad Hotel*, it feels at once familiar and alien. Your geometric craft climbs and dives in a manner akin to *Whale Trail*, while the sounds you collect on your horizontal journey add layers to a shifting soundtrack, much as in *Sound Shapes*, which the studio acknowledges was an influence. Yet *Wave Trip*'s more challenging and esoteric than both: the soundscapes you gradually construct feel more like short, experimental sketches, while a single collision with the fast-moving enemies populating each stage resets your multiplier, making high scores hard to come by. A shield deflects foes with a tap, but it's slow to recharge, meaning barrages are best avoided altogether, even if it means missing out on a beat or two.

One senses, however, that mastery isn't the real priority. An intuitive level editor allows players to create and share their musical journeys, with each world offering a fresh pack of instruments to experiment with. The lack of instruction here is telling: Lucky Frame wants people to discover the joy of making music, and this stylish and entertaining curio is a fine place to do so.

7



create

Lifting the lid on the art, science and business of making games

This issue's People, Places, Things throws its first punch on p114 as we step into the ring with Seth Killian, who explains how he left behind academic philosophy to help make *Street Fighter IV*. Places, on p116, takes us to the dystopian ex-gulag of Nova Prospekt, the setting that recasts Gordon Freeman as a resistance figurehead. Then Things detonates the tiredest of gaming's crutches, the exploding barrel, on p118, and sifts through the debris to see if there's life lurking here yet. Our Studio Profile on p120 sees us tease open the latch to Fireproof's Guildford home to ask the maker of Apple's 2012 Game Of The Year, *The Room*, about its path to success. The Making Of... on p124 swings the spotlight on the masterful *Final Fantasy VI* and how a steampunk reboot snapped Square's series out of a rut. The Art Of... on p128 peers into the hellish vessel at the heart of *The Chronicles Of Riddick: Assault On Dark Athena* and explores how Starbreeze brought the story of an anti-hero trying to escape a femme fatale's clutches to brooding life. As ever, our columnists provide our parting notes, with designer Tadhg Kelly (p132) extolling the virtues of the microconsole and considering its potential for disruption, and Clint Hocking (p134) getting clinical about the evolving design of health systems. Randy Smith (p136) lays out some things he's learned about being creative, while writer James Leach (p138) is sick and tired of all the clichés in gaming, and he's itching to write about it till the cows come home.



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More development news, analysis and reviews



Being a *Street Fighter* fan changed Seth Killian's life. We explore his unusual journey through gaming on p114

People

SETH KILLIAN

How fighting games' favourite son ended up at a prized Sony studio



After being drawn into the industry by Capcom because of his passion for fighting games, one-time philosopher Seth Killian moved to Sony Santa Monica in June 2012 as its lead game designer

By day, **Seth Killian** was a philosophy teacher at the University Of Illinois. By night, he was a competitive *Street Fighter* player and tournament organiser, part of a small group of US players who were collectively laying the foundations for what is now a highly organised nationwide scene. Videogames were a passion, sure – he did advocacy work for the Entertainment Software Association, his experience of a hugely social, arcade-based pastime proving a handy courtroom counterpoint to the common perception of games as a solitary, unhealthy pursuit – but he'd never considered a career in the industry. Until, that is, Capcom asked him to help make *Street Fighter IV*.

"It was nothing magical," Killian tells us, though that's rather contradicted by the explanation of events that follows. As a thank you for his advocacy work, the ESA gave him free entry to E3 every year, and he and his fighting game friends would always agree on the Capcom booth being the end-of-day meeting point. One year, a friend suggested he ask the Capcom representatives for some merchandise to give away as tournament prizes. "They said, 'Get lost. Take a hike, weirdo,'" he laughs. "I was like, no problem, I *am* a weirdo from the Internet, which at that time was even weirder. So I took a hike."

He tried again the following year, and took another hike. The next year, however, the reaction was more positive; Christian Svensson, now Capcom's senior vice president, had just joined the company and wanted more engagement with the *Street Fighter* community – meaning people like Killian. A job offer soon followed. He turned it down, not wanting to waste ten years of academic philosophy. "And that's when they told me, 'We've greenlit a game called *Street Fighter IV*, and here's a really early wireframe.' I was like, 'Wow, this looks terrible,'" he laughs. "'This is the worst thing I've ever seen.'"

> "'We've greenlit Street Fighter IV, and here's a really early wireframe.' I was like, 'Wow, this looks terrible'"

His family tried to talk him out of it, but to no avail. "I decided I had to. Fighting games had been a huge part of my life. I knew the magic of the genre, but it had sort of disappeared, and here was a chance to bring it back with a real budget. I felt like if it didn't go as well as it possibly could, and I'd passed on a chance to potentially help, I would have thought about that decision every day for the rest of my life."

He settled in quickly, his lack of industry experience proving something of an asset. Eager to prove himself, he pulled no punches in early milestone reviews. "I was being very tough. It could have been seen as disrespectful, because I was like, 'This is no good,' which is not the way you talk to senior Japanese management! I didn't know the proper etiquette. But it worked out well, because at least they understood that I knew what I was talking about. We got on very well."

Street Fighter IV in its many forms has sold over six million copies and breathed new life into a genre that had spent the best part of a decade on life support. While Capcom's peers set about rebooting their own cobwebbed fighting series, Killian moved onto another game, *Marvel Vs Capcom 3*, working with Eighting, developer of Wii curio *Tatsunoko Vs Capcom: Ultimate All-Stars*. Focusing his efforts on *MVC3* and its follow-up, *Ultimate MVC3*, Killian's role in the development of *Street Fighter X Tekken* was limited to early planning meetings. After release, players drifted away from *SFXT*, its intricate core combo system undermined by balance-breaking DLC. "I spent a lot of my focus early on in *SFXT* pushing for some different possible implementations of the microtransaction model, maybe a free-to-play thing," he says. "By the time it got to balancing and gameplay, I was a little bit less involved – it was near the end of my time there."

This was a trying period for Capcom. *Street Fighter* series producer Yoshinori Ono embarked on a seemingly endless worldwide promotional tour for *Street Fighter X Tekken* with Namco's Katsuhiro Harada. On the eve of an event in Korea, he was hospitalised. Killian, too, was exhausted.

"I had a confused role at Capcom," he admits. "I had my boss in the US office, a boss in the London office who ran the marketing division, and Ono-san in Japan. Between those guys, there's three time zones separated by eight hours. I literally had a 24-hour cycle of things to take care of. It was never quiet. There was a huge amount of travel. I was spending six, sometimes more, months on the road which is just… difficult. It grinds you down."

As a result, few were surprised when Killian announced his departure from Capcom last June. The shock was where he ended up: as lead game designer for the external group at SCE Santa Monica Studio, a sort of PlayStation polisher-in-chief with credits in the last 12 months alone on the likes of *Sound Shapes*, *The Unfinished Swan* and *Journey*. What does a man with no formal training and experience with just one very specific genre bring to such a varied role? "There are some concrete answers to that problem, but they're not announced yet," he says. "It certainly won't *all* be fighting games, but that was part of the reason I wanted to go to Santa Monica. I felt very comfortable at Capcom, and I like moving around; I like feeling challenged. Once I feel like I have the hang of something, I try to move onto something else and find a challenge there."

At least he was given a chance to ease himself in, with his first task being to oversee completion of *PlayStation All-Stars Battle Royale*. Killian was brought on too late to really make his mark – he speaks several times of his hope for a sequel with us – but he's clearly pleased with the final product. Many of the development staff, including game director Omar Kendall, have close ties to the fighting game community, and Killian, no longer under Capcom's employ, is free to compete again. He has, however, found himself at a disadvantage. While he was away, players have discovered a host of new tricks in his preferred game, *Super Street Fighter II Turbo*. In his first tournament since being back, he lost twice to T Hawk, the character that has been the principal beneficiary of those discoveries. At a time in which the scene has grown immeasurably, with the genre's resurgence causing an influx of new blood and the Internet enabling players to be more connected than ever, how does it feel to be in the thick of it after so long out of competition?

"I've known a lot of the kids that are at the top now since they were teenagers. I'm excited about the possibilities, but I get worried about people who are aiming strictly at the money at times when they're making important choices about their lives in terms of school and their career. It's a bit like being a dad. You're sort of proud and worried at the same time, [and] hopeful they'll do the right thing." ■

CV

URL www.worldwidestudios.net/santamonica
Selected Softography *Street Fighter IV* (2008), *Super Street Fighter IV* (2010), *Marvel Vs Capcom 3* (2011), *PlayStation All-Stars Battle Royale* (2012)



Places

NOVA PROSPEKT

Why the ugly heart of Combine rule is the perfect place to strike back



Antlions have been your foes for a while by the time you reach the cold halls of Nova Prospekt, which makes it all the more satisfying to turn them against the Combine

From *Half-Life 2*
Developer Valve
Origin US
First release 2004



Dr Vance's capture is your motivation for entering Nova Prospekt's dystopian spaces, but the rescue doesn't go quite as planned

City 17 is an alien dictatorship built upon the ashes of a human one. While Viktor Antonov's art design is celebrated for its visual metaphor of oppression – cold steel is grafted with ugly indifference onto plaster and stone – there's a more subtle and historical layer to *Half-Life 2*'s authoritarian aesthetics. The series' shift to an unspecified Eastern European setting provides an eerie resonance to Valve's fiction, lending a tale of alien overlords and interdimensional resistance movements a kind of secondhand authenticity. The browbeaten, broken existence of City 17's inhabitants is easier to believe when you see the starkly modernist Soviet apartment blocks they call home, just as the dehumanising brutality doled out by Civil Protection officers echoes the well-documented abuses of the Stasi and other secret police. When an uprising begins in the game's final act, the Combine's iron-fisted response most recalls tanks rolling into Georgia. But nowhere are the thematic parallels between history and Valve's alternate reality more clear than Nova Prospekt.

As its name's Newspeakish translation ('new perspective') and the faintly Cyrillic 'k' hint, Nova Prospekt is a gulag resurrected by the Combine to function as a processing facility for its prisoners; a case of one dictatorship making use of another's leftovers. In City 17, the Combine's alien architecture can be seen aggressively encroaching on its human counterpart. Here, however, the two are bleakly harmonious: the cold blue lighting and iron bars of Nova Prospekt's prison blocks sitting alongside the Combine's hi-tech cameras and turrets, while jackbooted inhuman soldiers man security stations and patrol the halls like the NKVD. Gordon Freeman's journey through the facility eventually sees him leave the prison behind and get into a climactic teleportation chamber battle, but the transition from Soviet brutality to Combine inhumanity is so subtle that you can easily miss the point of shift.

> Nova Prospekt hints that the alien Combine aren't quite the unstoppable force they appear to be

So when you stumble across a dead Vortigaunt (*HL2*'s alien slaves-turned-allies) strapped to an interrogation chair in one of the cell blocks, we're given to understand that more than one story is being told. There's the obvious implication of the blood-soaked tableau – a prisoner has been tortured to death – but we're also invited to consider the acts of cruelty that occurred in Nova Prospekt's past, and the acts that have happened in buildings like this in reality. The Combine might be an alien force oppressing by proxy, but the deliberate parallels established between it and the Stalinist dictatorship ensure it stands for tyrannies both real and imagined.

So it's fitting that Freeman's revolution starts here. *Half-Life 2* is a carefully paced game, and it's no accident that Freeman spends the first half of it on the run. When Freeman returns to City 17, however, it's as a liberator, the mascot of a civilian uprising that at least temporarily topples the regime. In other words, Nova Prospekt is the pivot around which *Half-Life 2*'s plot turns. It's the moment Freeman switches from being the right man in the wrong place to a hero, and the level plays out this reversal theme.

Its first job, though, is to convince you that the Combine aren't invincible. Up till now, they've been the omnipresent oppressors who've ransacked every resistance stronghold you've stumbled across, driving you forward. Nova Prospekt hints that they aren't quite the unstoppable force they appear to be. For one, much of the prison is in the same state of scrappy disrepair as the resistance's bases. Headcrabs and their victims lurk in disused corners and flooded basements, while you access the facility itself via a neglected sewer tunnel. Until now, antagonist Dr Wallace Breen's broadcasts have been assured propaganda intended for public consumption, but Freeman's infiltration grants us a glimpse of the reality behind the facade, with the Administrator upbraiding the Overwatch soldiers over their failure to capture a mere physicist. Then, of course, there's the matter of this dark, ugly symbol of oppression being torn apart from the inside.

Nova Prospekt occurs well before *Half-Life 2*'s final act, but not until he gets his hands on the Super Gravity Gun is Freeman as empowered as he is here. More than just a narrative turning point, Nova Prospekt flips the dynamics of the previous hour of play. Throughout the preceding levels, Freeman has been stalked by Antlions, alien insects that spring from coastal beaches. By the time of his assault on the Combine stronghold, however, he finds himself commanding a pack of the skittering beasts. It's an elegantly executed turnabout; you've learnt through experience about the threat that the Antlions pose, and now get to use them to take out Nova Prospect's watchtowers and to storm its security stations.

Deeper into the facility, Freeman also turns the Combine's turrets against them in a pair of set-pieces that require you to stand your ground and prepare for battle, placing turrets to ensure troops get shredded upon entering a chamber. First-time players may not grasp the implications of Freeman going on the offensive, but the shift from harried prey to guerrilla fighter is palpable.

Nova Prospekt is a processing facility where normal citizens are detained and even reconfigured into things disturbingly less than human. So it makes perfect sense that it's also the place where Gordon Freeman learns to strike first, and becomes the figurehead for a revolution. ■

CREATE
PEOPLE, PLACES, THINGS

Things

EXPLODING BARRELS

Blowing a longstanding convention wide open



From the visually extravagant to the supremely basic, the red barrel is so ingrained in FPS design that some contend deviation is unwise. Players certainly expect red barrels to go bang on cue anyway

Because it's an imperfect compromise between narrative logic and design rules, videogame reality is inherently silly. In fact, this is part of the fun. After blowing up an overpass, you hide in the brush for a moment and the cops forget you ever existed. You can walk forever without consequence while carrying ten rifles, but get winded after ten seconds of running. You enter a barbershop bald and leave with a Prince Valiant bob. These kinds of clichés have launched a thousand webcomics and GIFs. One of the most enduring and widespread examples also happens to be the most elaborately illogical. The security forces of any military/industrial compound you infiltrate will establish defensive positions around explosive barrels that happen to be out in the open, often painted red or even helpfully marked 'Flammable'. Bullets unfailingly detonate them, whether instantly or after a hissing delay, splash damaging nearby enemies without harming the equally ubiquitous crates of money, ammo and medical supplies sitting around.

None of this is news to anyone who's played a shooter in the last two decades. The Big Bang of exploding barrels was *Doom* in the early '90s, where they were grey in colour and filled with green slime, characterised as "fuel, toxic waste, or some other volatile substance". Never mind that the barrels' contents were left strangely (if prophetically) ambiguous, as a gameplay mechanic it was enough that they went boom. While hazardous to the careless player, they allowed the expert fragger to create devastating chain reactions with a single shot, adding a new strategic tool to the firstperson shooter's then-embryonic kit. This environmental force multiplier fit so well into the one-versus-many framework of shooters that it quickly became a standard feature, appearing in games far too numerous to list. The TV Tropes website, an obsessive monument to storytelling clichés, lists more than 100 examples.

By 2000, exploding barrels were familiar enough for gaming humour website Old Man Murray to mint a satiric 'Start To Crate' system, which rewarded games according to how long it took before a crate or barrel appeared, the implication being that design expediency had started to trump innovation. Despite this evidence of a backlash against conveniently placed explosives, game designers didn't get rid of them. But, as if to head off complaints, they began to offer flimsy in-game rationales and winking commentary. A character in *Red Faction: Guerrilla* explains that the enemy wouldn't leave their fuel tanks around if they didn't want them to be shot, while one in *Battlefield: Bad Company 2* complains about being "all Spec Ops'd up" and "still blowin' up barrels".



Half-Life 2 **extended the barrel's remit, giving it fuse-like properties and you the ability to lob them with the Gravity Gun**

Even though virtually everyone seems to agree that they're absurd, modern games are as barrel-heavy as ever. In the recent hit shooter *Borderlands 2*, barrels don't just blow up, they also shock, burn, corrode and even debuff. They form a crucial layer of strategy and it's hard to imagine how the game would have been better without them. To the contrary, the act of aiming at stationary targets adds a welcome syncopation to the rhythm of aiming at moving ones, and any bullet-saving grace in a game with limited ammo creates a rewarding feeling of thrift. Perhaps because the effects of the different barrels are colour-coded to correspond with those in your arsenal, developer Gearbox was able to bring some new life to the concept, while *Bulletstorm* developer People Can Fly ran into problems.

As if to head off complaints, devs began to offer flimsy rationales and winking commentary

In a blog post titled We Had To Use Red Barrels, a *Bulletstorm* team member gave an insider's perspective on the necessary evil of exploding barrels – and not just exploding barrels, but the same ones you've shot a million times before. "It seems like a development curse. Pretty much every action game has red barrels that'll explode if you shoot at them. One could easily argue it's because of a lack of imagination on the developer's side… But, as it turns out, it's not that simple. We made a stab at trying something different instead of going with the cliché. In the beginning we had green barrels… They got completely ignored by the players and no one guessed or assumed that they were explosive. Why not? Because they weren't red."

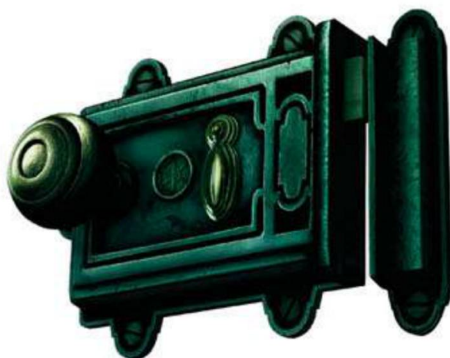
Certainly, red is the readiest colour, being the colour of danger, and one we're used to. But this lets designers off the hook too easily. It's their task to implement new concepts and effectively communicate them, and the aforementioned *Borderlands 2* disproves that gamers are so irrevocably conditioned, like Pavlov's dogs, that they can't see things differently. With imagination, the mechanic of striking a fixed target to affect a group of moving ones could be mapped onto all kinds of non-barrel scenarios. For that matter, so could the shooter itself, which boils down to timing button presses with an aligned pair of points, one of which you control. But there's no reason to suspect exploding barrels are going away any faster than shooters – we don't mind stale design when it's also efficient comfort food, and we appreciate sources of continuity in a rapidly evolving gaming world. The redeeming aspect of recurrent clichés is how they serve as measures for the tastes of connoisseurs, like the nuances of the same grapes in different wines. "Which games do you guys think had the best exploding barrels?" a poster once asked earnestly on Giant Bomb's forums. "Try to think of all the aspects: sound, flames, shrapnel, deadliness." ■

STUDIO PROFILE

Fireproof Studios

From pioneering a different kind of outsourcing to winning Apple's 2012 Game Of The Year









1 *The Room* is Fireproof's most visible success story, garnering critical praise and Apple's nod as its Game Of The Year. The iOS puzzler is a step away from the studio's normal model of working, though, since it usually supports larger outfits. 2 Fireproof's artists were the ones behind these backgrounds in *LittleBigPlanet 2* and several of the add-ons for *LBP*, easing the strain of two asset-heavy games















Founded 2008
Employees 13
Key staff Barry Meade, Mark Hamilton (co-founders), Robert Dodd (technical director)
URL www.fireproofstudios.com
Selected softography *LittleBigPlanet, LittleBigPlanet 2, Ridge Racer Unbounded, DJ Hero 2, Split Second, Bodycount, Blur*
Current projects *The Room* additional content

A little under two weeks before Christmas, Guildford's Fireproof Studios released an iPhone-compatible version of its iPad hit, *The Room*. **Robert Dodd**, until recently *The Room*'s only coder, was understandably nervous, regularly checking his phone – even in the pub – for bug reports and other birthing pains. Imagine his horror, then, at seeing his inbox rapidly swell with 30 or so emails, which Dodd wasn't even able to read thanks to patchy signal.

He needn't have worried: the messages were congratulatory in nature. Apple had just crowned *The Room* its Game Of The Year 2012, rounding off a spectacular year for Fireproof that, on the surface at least, contains all the ingredients of an indie success story in the age of iOS. In short, a small studio founded by staff tired of working for large publishers takes a creative gamble with its debut title, which pays off in the form of critical and commercial rewards. But, like the complex, whirring innards of the puzzle boxes in the Fireproof's eerie puzzler, the studio's story isn't as straightforward as it initially appears. For one thing, Fireproof was formed back in 2008, when Apple's destabilisation of the gaming market was barely a ripple. And for another, Fireproof's initial ambition wasn't even to make games of its own.

Before 2008, Fireproof's founders had spent the most of the decade working as the senior artists on Criterion's *Burnout* series, bonding as they crafted assets for *Burnout 3* and sticking together all the way through to *Paradise*. "We ran the team, hired and fired everybody, but did a lot of design work ourselves," explains Fireproof's commercial director **Barry Meade**. It was here that they identified what they'd go on to jokingly term a "Fireproof-sized hole" in the industry.

"On *Paradise*, we worked with outsourcers," explains designer and artist **Mark Hamilton**. "But it was the kind of big-company model of outsourcing that was like 300 people in the Far East, [or] in our case, India. And [lead artist] Dave [Rack] had to go out there for months to work with them. We found that process really difficult. We knew how much the company was spending on it, how much the return was and how much we had to do in-house to make the art we were getting back good. And we thought, 'Well, we could do a better job of this.'"

What Hamilton, Meade and company had been looking for was a readily available pool of artistic talent that could be trusted to work



Fireproof's team is based in a light office space in Guildford, where a lot of *LittleBigPlanet* content has been made

alongside, rather than for, the art team. "There were people who would knock up lampposts, tables and chairs for us," Meade explains, "but no one who could blue sky with us, or help us design stuff. We had to dictate stuff that everybody did, even the really good people." Since the Criterion-based art team wasn't able to find such a studio, they decided to found one.

"We left to a become a studio people would hire to be as competent as their own internal teams – and therefore would be allowed to take on creative heavy lifting and proper design work", explains Hamilton. And even today (alongside plenty of material for *The Room*), these values are promoted heavily by Fireproof's website, which stresses the studio's creative and collaborative approach to outsourcing. But in 2008, there were plenty of potential clients unable to grasp the proposition.

> "Everything we made for LBP looked amazing on screen. Who cares if [people] can't pick it out?"

"I can tell you now, at the first meeting with some clients they didn't have a clue what we were talking about," admits Meade. "The idea of actually giving out game design to an exterior company was practically unheard of at the time."

It's fitting, perhaps, that Fireproof's aims were vindicated by another bunch of Guildford-based breakaway creatives. "It was Molecule, really," says Hamilton, "Media Molecule got us up and running, and the work they had for us really kept us going for the first two years."

It was a perfect match. *LittleBigPlanet* is in essence an art asset-heavy concept, with the add-on packs on which Fireproof began work providing suites of materials and objects for players to create with. And Media Molecule itself was also receptive to Fireproof's goals. "We knew them from before we left Criterion," Hamilton explains, "so they trusted us with the crazy idea that we were going to come alongside their team and make bits of the game they wouldn't normally outsource. I think they gave us a lot of confidence that what we were trying to do would work."

If you've played any *LittleBigPlanet* DLC pack, or indeed any of *LittleBigPlanet 2*, then you've experienced some of Fireproof's work: all of the animated backgrounds in *LBP2* were supplied by Hamilton, Meade and the team. "We'd have an hour-long meeting about the theme we were going to do," Meade says, "and for the next five weeks we'd work our arses off, designing and building this stuff for them; they didn't have to be involved."

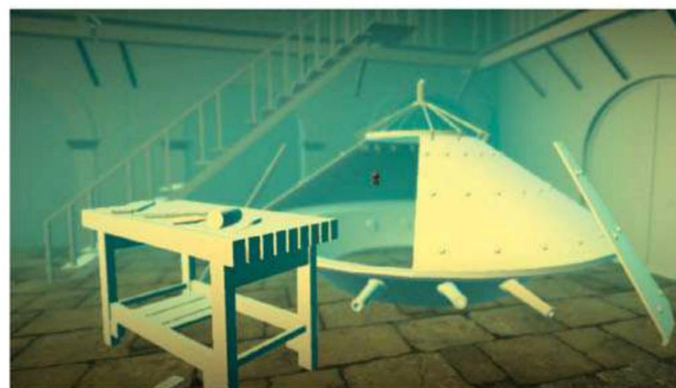
The irony of Fireproof's role is that the better the job the team does, the more invisible its work becomes, its art assets slotting seamlessly into another studio's game. You'd think this might be galling for an artist, but Meade and Hamilton betray no dissatisfaction with the arrangement.

"Our last game at Criterion was *Burnout Paradise*," Hamilton explains, "And *Paradise* was a 60 frames per second open-world title. So we had really, really tight budgets. We had next to no shaders, we couldn't do any normal mapping or anything like that. And *LBP* was super-macro detailed, really high density. So it was a really different challenge as an artist. All through the last four years of outsourcing, we've had to jump [from] one engine, one level editor to another, [and] learn new packages and techniques and art styles. It's really rewarding as an artist, especially when you've been on one game for five years."

"Everything we made for *LBP* looked amazing when it was on the screen," interjects Meade. "Who cares if [people] can't pick our work out exactly when it looks so good?"

The nature of Fireproof's work means it prizes flexibility in staff more than a single, particularly developed skillset, and with the studio having worked on games as diverse as *Ridge Racer Unbounded*, Freestyle Games' *DJ Hero* series, and even *Kinect Sesame Street*, it's easy to see why. And when, in January 2012, Hamilton and





The Room (left) is renowned for its intricate puzzles and ambiance. The central idea is to gain access to a safe at the centre of the room, which contains secrets we won't spoil here. It was supported by Fireproof's outsourcing work for Media Molecule's *LittleBigPlanet (above)*

Meade sequestered themselves from the rest of Fireproof's staff to begin work on the first game of the studio's own, this need for flexibility extended to their choice of coder.

"I've done a few things" Dodd explains. "At Criterion, I was physics; before that, UI – systems stuff. We don't really have space for specialists."

Formed midway through a hardware generation that brought digital distribution to the fore, the Fireproof team had naturally assumed that its eventual transition to development would involve PSN or XBLA. Come 2012, however, Apple had provided a viable alternative.

"By that point, iOS was pretty huge," recalls Hamilton. "We just sat in the office one day with the *Epic Citadel* demo on the iPad and went, 'This is actually pretty cool'. Before that, iOS in my head was something that was always 2D and cartoony; simple puzzles that are cool – I play them – but aren't the kind of thing I want to make. We saw ourselves as a high-end art team and wanted to make something [to] take advantage of what we were good at."

"Until that point, iOS wasn't a viable platform [for us]," Meade continues. "It was too weak; it didn't have the software. But when Rob joined, iOS was a known quantity enough that we had decided to make three different games in three months. We'd spend a month doing a demo for each game and then at the end of those three months we'd decide which game to take forward and finish."

The first game Fireproof prototyped was 2D, cartoon-styled and physics-based – in Hamilton's words, it was "exactly the kind of game you're supposed to make on iOS". What it wasn't, however, is the kind of game Fireproof wanted to make. Its second idea was less typical. A digital take on the Chinese puzzle boxes that can still be found lined up on the windowsills of its office, Fireproof's second prototype was an inverted locked room mystery. Rather than trying to work their way out of enclosed space, players would work their way in, fiddling with the puzzling mechanisms built into a series of locked boxes. As well as offering far greater potential for immersion than the first idea, it was a concept suited to Fireproof's art-focused skillset.

"Having an object just floating in space meant we could have all these amazing materials on it," says Hamilton. "Nice woods and metals and reflectivity. We could have that onscreen; the only thing onscreen – and you moved around it. *The Room* came out of our limitations, the device's limitations and our art strengths. The scope of it was small, so we could make it look amazing."

Much of the carefully honed atmosphere in *The Room* derived from these limitations. The team had an interest in Lovecraftian horror, which provided a convenient excuse for the resource-saving decision to shroud the periphery of the room in total darkness. An occasional creaking floorboard added buckets of extra atmosphere to the game space. And Hamilton worked hard on polishing – all but literally – the sides of his immaculately rendered puzzle boxes. But as astute as the small splinter team (the vast majority of Fireproof's teams were still working on outsourcing projects) had been in its design approach, it was impossible not to notice that the game being made – a narrative-focused, ad-free, IAP-free paid app – was far from the kind of game that was supposed to succeed on the App Store.

> "A developer coming to the iOS market fresh might decide free-to-play is the only way to make money"

"We knew it wasn't the way you were supposed to make an iOS game to make money," admits Dodd, "but we thought, possibly a bit naïvely (but I think it's been borne out now), that if we made a game that was good enough, and did a traditional premium model for it, that [it] would work."

"We tried to minimise breaking the fourth wall once you were in the game," adds Hamilton. "If we were popping to a menu every now and then to ask you to buy more hints it just... rips you out of the experience," he explains.

Fireproof's commitment to making an immersive, premium experience paid off, of course. Apple has been a key supporter of the game, with its end-of-year accolade propelling *The Room* back up the paid chart for a second time. Team members are diplomatic when discussing other business models – "it's a big market that can take all shapes and sizes of games," says Meade – but it's clear their personal preferences don't include the currently in vogue free-to-play model.

"A lot of people said we should charge for hints, stuff like that," says Dodd. "But say we'd done that. For me, personally, that would make me worry about the design a lot more. Because there could have been the perception that we'd made a particular puzzle really difficult to make people pay. There's a bit in the game that a lot of people got stuck on, where you had to tilt the iPad. There would have been a lot of accusations that we put it in there so people would get stuck."

For all *The Room*'s success, the game hasn't spent nearly as much time in Apple's Top Grossing chart as iOS's free-to-play behemoths, and that the game exists in the form it does is a reflection of the security Fireproof's outsourcing work provided. "If we didn't have the other side of the business, we wouldn't have been able to fund *The Room* ourselves," explains Dodds. "A developer coming to this market fresh might look at the Paid chart and the Top Grossing chart, and decide free-to-play is the only way to make money. It'll be a real shame if people stop making [premium] games."

But if *The Room* started life as a relatively risk-free, self-funded experiment, it's become a flagship title for the exactly the kind of experience the team hopes to see on iOS, as well as proof that Fireproof can balance its outsourcing contracts with internal development. And while necessity (not to mention contract terms) dictate some practical separation between the two halves of the business, both are united by a commitment to creativity and quality. ■

Q&A



Barry Meade
Commercial director, Fireproof Studios

Formerly an artist at Criterion, **Barry Meade** found himself in the role of Fireproof's commercial director upon leaving to co-found the studio. Fireproof was formed just as digital distribution and mobile platforms completely altered the playing field for small studios and indies. We discuss with Meade the route the studio took to making its own titles.

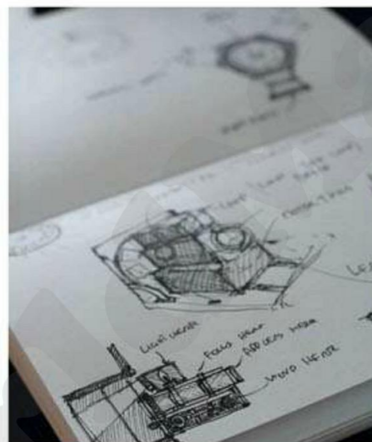
When you left Criterion to start work as an outsourcing studio, was the plan always to self-publish your own titles?
The plan was to get noticed; to get our names known by really good publishers and developers. We went out of our way to win business from games we really liked. When we were working with veteran teams, everything went much more smoothly. Working with teams who didn't have the experience we had was much more difficult. In the longer term, we assumed that because PSN and XBLA were happening at the time, the route to making our own games was downloadable titles. There wasn't really an App Store at that point; nobody was really conscious at that point how big iOS was going to be. But it wasn't as if we had a masterplan – we had goals.

But were you aware possibilities were increasing for smaller development teams?
At the time, we genuinely thought that the Hollywood model would happen, because we could see the big studio system was already failing. That's why we left it behind, but there wasn't at yet any replacement for that system. So we thought what was most likely to happen was that we would get hired in a joint development deal with a bigger publisher, where we'd make these smaller games with smaller budget, but with triple-A quality. That didn't really happen, and in the end it took Unity and iOS to come along before we realised that we could do it on our own.

Were you unhappy in your role working for a larger publisher?
Well, we'd all worked very hard at Criterion. It wasn't a clock-in-and-out job. We'd put a lot of blood, sweat and tears into the *Burnout* games, and after five years it did become a bit aggravating that we weren't going to see the benefits of our hard work. But that was nothing to do with Criterion or the company we were working for. It's just the way it is if you're going to work for someone else.

Has *The Room*'s success and the Game Of 2012 award affected your future plans? Will you be making many new games?
We haven't had time to process, really. We have to have those meetings and figure out what it means. It's a wonderful thing, though; it's amazing what happened. We thought it would be a longer slog. We thought that by game three we'd start to make money, and that's what we were calculating. And yet we made our money back in the first week of sales. We haven't started ramping up [a fresh] game production right away, though.



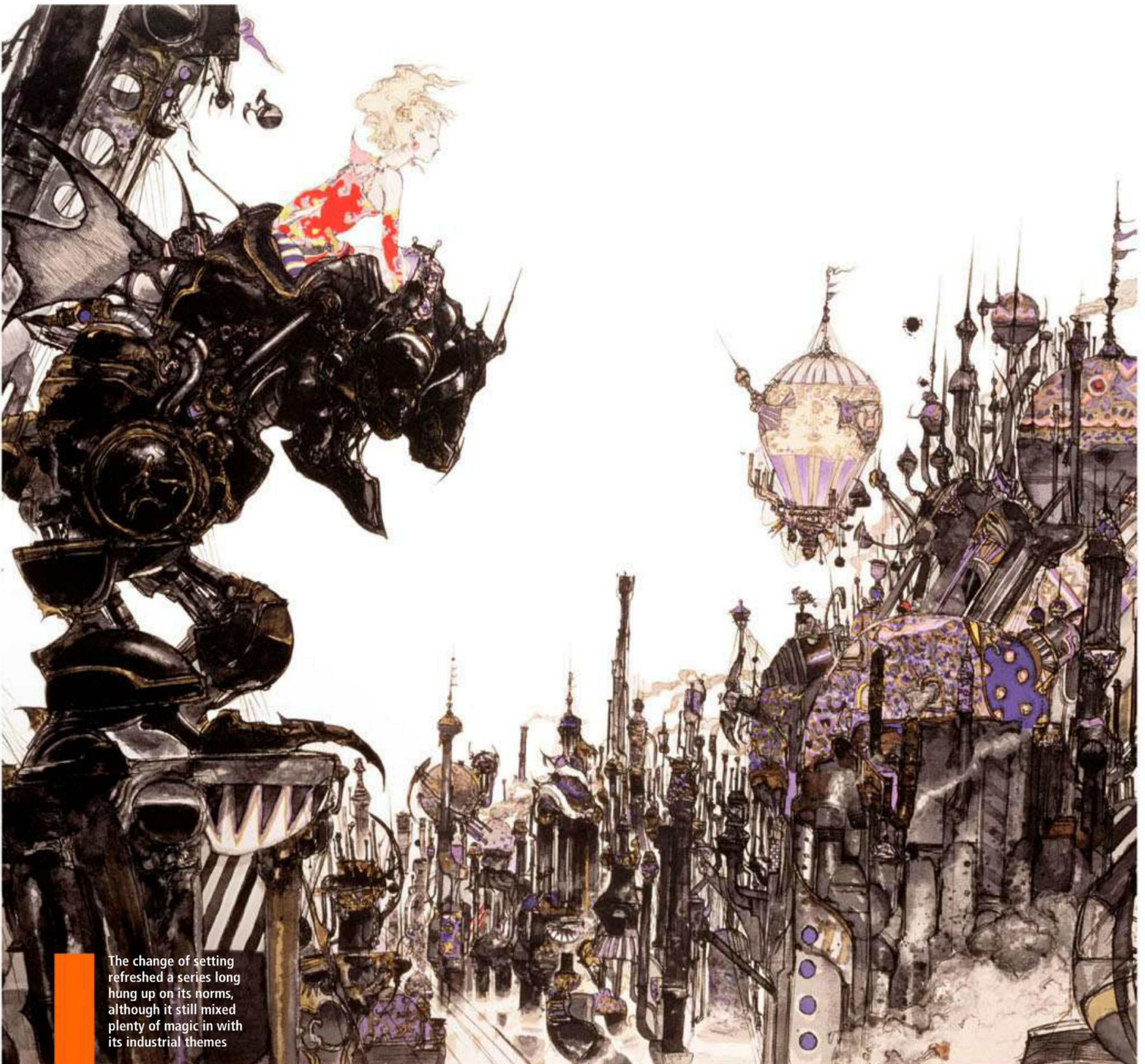


These concept sketches for *The Room* demonstrate Fireproof's attention to detail and its eye for crafting fantastic objects with a grounded feel

THE MAKING OF…

Final Fantasy VI

How a steampunk reboot snapped Square's totemic series out of cosy familiarity



The change of setting refreshed a series long hung up on its norms, although it still mixed plenty of magic in with its industrial themes

Format SNES
Publisher Square
Developer In-house
Origin Japan
Release April 1994

Even back in 1994, the *Final Fantasy* series was settling into the sort of routine for which it later became well known – and was often scorned for. While each of the five formative games was set in an unfamiliar universe, with an unfamiliar clutch of characters to serve and know, recurring rhythms and themes had already been established that seemed fundamental to its identity.

Crystals and oversized chickens, knights and castles, a mystical power threatening the world and an unexpected orphan hero: all echoes of Tolkien bottled, infused with Japanese aromas, and then blasted out in bombastic, near-annual game releases. The details changed with each game, but the tone – not to mention the systemic DNA – remained a constant. Lose these anchors and you'd risk losing the *Final Fantasy* spirit, the only thing yoking one game to the next.

The sixth game, however, interrupted that rhythm in many unexpected ways. Drawing back the curtain on a steampunk world quite unlike any seen in *Final Fantasy* before, it opened not with the burning of a village or a vainglorious battle between buff-armoured knights, but with a squadron of weary robots trudging mournfully through the snow. It's here, in the remote town of Narshe (population 2,100), that we first meet the ensemble cast, a rogue's gallery of eccentrics pulled from the extremities of society – the high royal and penniless pauper – whose stories soon intertwine in delightful, unexpected ways.

"We began work on *Final Fantasy VI* with the idea that every character is the protagonist of the story," says **Yoshinori Kitase**, the game's director. "Everyone on the team contributed ideas for characters into a melting pot. We were very keen to design a game featuring individual episodes for each character. In fact, *Final Fantasy VI*'s influence may have been responsible for the greater emphasis on character creation in subsequent titles in the series."

For Kitase – who today keeps a steady hand on the *Final Fantasy* tiller following the departure of series creator Hironobu Sakaguchi from Square Enix – this was his first directorial job. It was a significant promotion for the young designer, who had worked in a range of disciplines across Square's 8- and 16bit titles. Prior to *Final Fantasy VI*, he had penned the story for *Final Fantasy Adventure* on the Game Boy (originating key plot points and turning them into scripted events in the game), been field map designer for *Romancing SaGa* (shaping the game world's landscape) and, most recently, event planner for *Final Fantasy V*.

"When it came time to begin work on *Final Fantasy VI*, Sakaguchi divided responsibilities between us," says Kitase. "He placed me in charge of event production, carefully assessing those parts I directed. I was essentially given the task of unifying all the scenarios and dramatic sections in the game into a coherent narrative."

Final Fantasy VI contains the largest cast of playable actors of any game in the series, with 14 permanent playable characters, and a further clutch of key performers who are either momentarily placed within the player's control, or are crucial to the plot's development. With so many discrete elements, ensuring coherency and intelligibility for the player was inevitably Kitase's most demanding challenge. "If we consider that *Final Fantasy* games are divided into two core elements: battles and drama," says Kitase, "then I oversaw design of the latter while Hiroyuki Ito supervised the battle aspects. It was then up to Sakaguchi to bring the project together as a whole, intelligible piece."

Work began on the game almost immediately after the international release of *Final Fantasy V* in 1992, and the entire production lasted just one year. Even though lines of responsibility were carefully drawn – necessarily so, for such an ambitious game with such a challenging development schedule – in reality the creative journey proved loose and collaborative.

"We began work on Final Fantasy VI with the idea that every character is the protagonist of the story"

"It was a hybrid process," explains Kitase. "Sakaguchi came up with the story premise, based on a conflict with imperial forces. As the game's framework was designed to provide leading roles to all the characters in the game, everyone on the team came up with ideas for character episodes."

Kitase's role was to piece these disparate vignettes together like a puzzle. "I can't say that I conceived the complete story," he recalls. "Locke and Terra, for example, are greatly coloured by Sakaguchi's influence. Meanwhile, the background and in-game episodes for Shadow and Setzer were mainly devised by Tetsuya Nomura [character designer for the *Final Fantasy* series from the seventh game onwards], while Kaori Tanaka [AKA Soraya Saga, illustrator and co-creator of *Xenogears*] provided suggestions for Edgar and Sabin, among others. I devoted my time and effort to creating Celes and Gau."

While Square's other in-house teams played with the idea of multiple protagonists in an RPG via another contemporaneous game, *Live A Live*, *Final Fantasy VI* was the first high-profile game to make the perspective-shifting storyline work with such flair and vigour. "Looking at videogame design and development up to that point," says Kitase, "I supposed that action games, for example, relied on sense and instinct while RPGs appealed more to reason and logic. What made the *Final Fantasy* series so innovative was the emotion realised from drama within the game in addition to those other elements. I believe this innovation was more apparent than ever before in the sixth game. This game really brought that creative goal into full bloom."

The Japanese RPG had always wrapped around the spine of story, but for Kitase and his team *Final Fantasy VI* offered a chance to increase the creative emphasis on narrative and character exposition. "The idea was to transform the *Final Fantasy* characters of the time from mere ciphers for fighting into true characters with substance and backstories who could evoke more interesting or complex feelings in the player," he says. "Since the scale of each character's individual story was expanding, I began linking this to the concept of different dramas developing, according to the player's choice of character in the game."

Final Fantasy VI's technique for investing players more fully into the narrative and inter-character relationships was to switch control of characters or groups of characters over the course of the storyline. This enabled players to function as both spectator and active participant in the business of drawing the various narrative threads together, as if taking part in an extended play.

Each of the controllable personalities encountered has a completely distinct – and unique – way of behaving in battle, not to mention their own fully fleshed out backstory to uncover. The battle system, while more orthodox than the game's story, is also wonderfully inventive, and the fact that each character in the game has their own clutch of moves and approaches – echoing their personalities – helps emphasise the character development. Gau, for example, is a feral child found wandering the desert, who can be tempted into the party with a slab of dried meat and has the capacity to learn new attacks from the animals and monsters that the party encounters. This marriage of backstory with active application in the game world fostered a clarity and precision rarely seen in releases of the time.

But balancing a game with multiple personalities in the lead role was not without its challenges. "Maintaining a careful equilibrium between all the characters was probably the greatest challenge I faced," says Kitase. "However, I ended up so involved with each personality while scripting the scenarios that there were points where, looking back at the game today, it's clear that I somewhat lost this balance. For example, as the scenes featuring Celes and Kefka progress, these characters (while not directly playable in the game) became far greater and more influential than originally intended when development began."

Released toward the end of the life of the SNES (AKA Super Famicom), the game brought with it a number of technical difficulties as the team attempted to draw ever-more impressive spectacle from the hardware. "From a technical point of view, I'd say our greatest challenge was the 3D rail scene," says Kitase. "We used the Super Famicom screen support mode known as Mode 7 and painstakingly illustrated the graphics one dot at a time to create a mock 3D effect. Although producing these graphics was a huge undertaking, the results we finally achieved were unfortunately far rougher on the eye than we had originally hoped. So, in the end, this section didn't leave anything like the lasting impression we intended for them."

Final Fantasy VI launched on schedule and within budget; but not without the strain of a significant crunch towards the end of production, which was necessary to iron out remaining issues in the code. "A huge challenge as production continued was managing memory, which, at the time, couldn't be entrusted to computers and had to be done manually," explains Kitase, "This meant human errors were much more prevalent than, say, when making games today."

Moreover, at the time that *Final Fantasy VI* was being developed, Square had no tools or software to aid programmers in detecting those errors. "I distinctly remember the process taking a long time," Kitase says. "In some ways, there's very little difference with debugging a game today when it comes to technical problems: we're still tormented by bugs! And goodness, the final debug phase of *Final Fantasy VI* was an exhausting affair. In fact, I missed out on the early reception to the game, as I took a month or so of holidays after production was concluded just to rest and recuperate."

Final Fantasy VI's story is atypical, both in terms of the series and the genre into which it somewhat awkwardly fits. The game suffers none of the bloated excesses and philosophising associated with Japanese RPGs of the time, each character presenting believable motivations, flaws and quirks with an authenticity that enriches the narrative. The plot keeps fantasy metaphysics to a minimum, instead focusing on more grounded topics of politics and empire-building – a decision that helped to endear and connect the game with western audiences, which found the storyline more immediately accessible and welcoming to their sensibility.

"In those days we didn't have the Internet and, as a more junior staff member, I wasn't given the opportunity to venture overseas – so I wasn't really aware of the reception the game received outside of Japan," says Kitase. "However, in more recent years, I've regularly tagged along on PR tours to Europe and America – and I have had a lot more opportunity to talk with foreign media and fans. I must say, whenever I go on these tours I'm taken aback by the number of westerners who ask me to sign their *Final Fantasy VI* cases. In Japan that would apply more to the subsequent game, *Final Fantasy VII*, but I get the impression there's a large number of players in the West who prefer the earlier game."

Launched in America with the title *Final Fantasy III* (the true second, third and fifth games in the series had been overlooked for translation), the game's English translator, Ted Woolsey, was granted just 30 days to complete his work. This gruelling deadline was compounded by Nintendo of America's strict guidelines on the use of language in games for its system. In an interview at the time Woolsey explained that "there's a certain level of playfulness and… sexuality in Japanese games that just doesn't exist here [in the USA], basically because of the rules and guidelines". The censorship extended to graphical assets, with nudity being covered and even some signs in being changed from 'Bar' to 'Café'.

Perhaps inevitably for a series that had established clear themes and ideas in the previous titles, the abandonment of certain of the *Final Fantasy* touchstones of the past was disorientating to some Japanese players upon release in 1994. "The absence of crystals – a symbolic item, which ran through previous *FF* titles – in this game, and the realisation of a fully technological civilisation and so on seemed to bewilder some of the more serious fans of the series," says Kitase. "That said, the impact of the opening scene, with Magitek Armors traversing through snowy fields, was well regarded; and fans were willing to accept the challenging culture of the game, so it was mostly well received at the time."

Final Fantasy VI's popularity has continued to grow as the series has gained wider recognition in subsequent years, with new fans tracking back to the earlier titles to explore its beginnings. It's also worth noting that this was the final 2D *Final Fantasy* game before the series switched from Nintendo hardware to Sony's PlayStation, and as such the game represents a development team in full control and mastery of the hardware.

"It's maybe strange to say [this], but I miss the limitations of making games in those days," Kitase acknowledges. "The cartridge capacity was so much smaller, of course, and therefore the challenges were that much greater. But nowadays you can do almost anything in a game. It's a paradox, but this can be more creatively limiting than having hard technical limitations to work within. There is a certain freedom to be found in working within strict boundaries, one clearly evident in *Final Fantasy VI*." ■

Q&A



Yoshinori Kitase
Event director, *FFVI*

What's your favourite moment in *Final Fantasy VI* nowadays?
The opera house scene remains my best loved in the game. I have such a fondness and pride for this sequence. It succeeded in synchronising a dramatic scenario, music, arresting visuals and technology in the best possible way.

Were there any particular influences on the writing and direction of that scene?
We paid a great deal of attention to how the dramatic side of certain films was handled. In this particular scene, we find dramatic suspense as players watch a play calmly unfolding on stage – but with a sense of mounting dread that the unthinkable is about to happen behind the scenes. The player has this knowledge while the in-game audience watching the play is entirely oblivious to the looming crisis, heightening the tension in interesting ways. This is something of a reference we took from films such as Alfred Hitchcock's The Man Who Knew Too Much and Foul Play by Colin Higgins.

Have you heard any stories of this piece of design influencing other game makers?
Yes. In fact, I was speaking with some people from the Eidos Montreal development team just the other day, they told me *Final Fantasy VI*'s opera scene had left a lasting impression on them. This made me feel quite proud.





This sumptuous art imbues each of the characters with even more personality than their in-game sprites. All the protagonists are united by a dislike for the Empire, though Terra Branford (right) is the standout for many, with much of the plot revolving around her



All for one

The collaborative nature of *Final Fantasy VI*'s inception is further evidenced by the contributions of its four key art directors. Tetsuya Takahashi – who later directed *Xenogears* and *Xenoblade Chronicles* for Nintendo, and was recently revealed to be working on a title called *X* – designed the imperial Magitek Armors seen in the game's iconic introductory sequence, as well as being responsible for the world map. Hideo Minaba was behind the world's architecture and the interiors of the game's many buildings, and Kazuko Shibuya assumed the role of character sprite designer. Meanwhile, Tetsuya Nomura, who would later become the series' main character designer, handled the look of the monsters, designing battle sprites for the 300-plus enemies encountered over the course of the game. That the final result was so cohesive despite being split up among the four is a testament to Square's creative process at the time.



The recurring moogles played a bigger part than ever in *Final Fantasy VI*, with Mog being the first playable member of the race

THE ART OF...

The Chronicles Of Riddick: Assault On Dark Athena

Get under the shell of Starbreeze's unusual sequel



This article's images appear courtesy of game art site Dead End Thrills (www.deadendthrills.com)

The performances for the imprisoned characters were recorded with a full suite of motion capture tools; actors were allowed a degree of improvisational freedom

Q&A



Mattias Snygg
Art director

Conceived as an epilogue to a remastered *The Chronicles Of Riddick: Escape From Butcher Bay*, one limited to a few new enemy types and weapons, *Assault On Dark Athena* grew, and then it grew again. It became a tale of space piracy so amoral that it creeps out even Riddick, with its nautical art style and raw mo-capped performances making for a distinctive concoction. As art director **Mattias Snygg** reminds us, though, getting such things in-engine is where much of a game's evolution occurs.

How did you find the Dark Athena's look?
Deep-sea marine creatures inspired much of the look of the exterior, but also the interiors and some of the costume design for the characters. The feel of materials… you can imagine the carapace feel of a crab in some of the armour. We were trying to entertain ourselves to a large degree, [to] come up with something that hasn't been done to death. And Riddick is such a larger-than-life character that it sort of fits. He needs stuff in his world that can stand up to him. You need to get these shrimp-like giant spaceships to try to eat him to level things out.

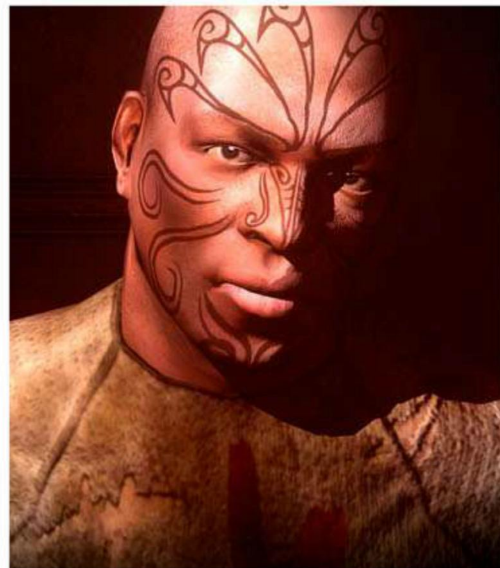
Gale Revas is enigmatic and somewhat contradictory – she's a great villain.
She's a strong and very competent female character in a genre that's very macho, and she stands up to everyone, even Riddick. She grew out of a lot of different ideas. She's tough but she's not trash; she's a little bit more refined than some of these other guys she's bossing around. At the same time, she's running an operation that's very crude and nasty and hostile to life. There's a lot of components to her persona, what she projects and what her business is.

There's her ethnicity and build, too.
As you said before, something is a little bit off with her. That was intentional. There's something about her eyes and the sheen of her skin that's different from the other characters, and she's set apart. On top of that, we have the badass armour and the dreadlocks creating a very distinct silhouette. We had the direction nailed down for her… But then it's always about getting that to look how you want in-engine. During production, that character went through a lot of iteration and so did everything else. There's a lot of technical things, like getting her hair to behave somewhat dreadlock-like. These things shape a lot of aesthetic decisions. And whenever technology puts a limit on what you can do, it can open up areas of possibility.

Is there an unusual set of priorities when you work on a firstperson melee game?
You need to be extremely selective. Riddick's hands are insanely detailed in terms of polygon count, and so are all the weapons. All the

Revas is capable enough to go toe to toe with Riddick in melee combat, which is surely proof of her credentials. She rules the shrimp-like Dark Athena with both an iron fist and honeyed promises as motivation for the crew





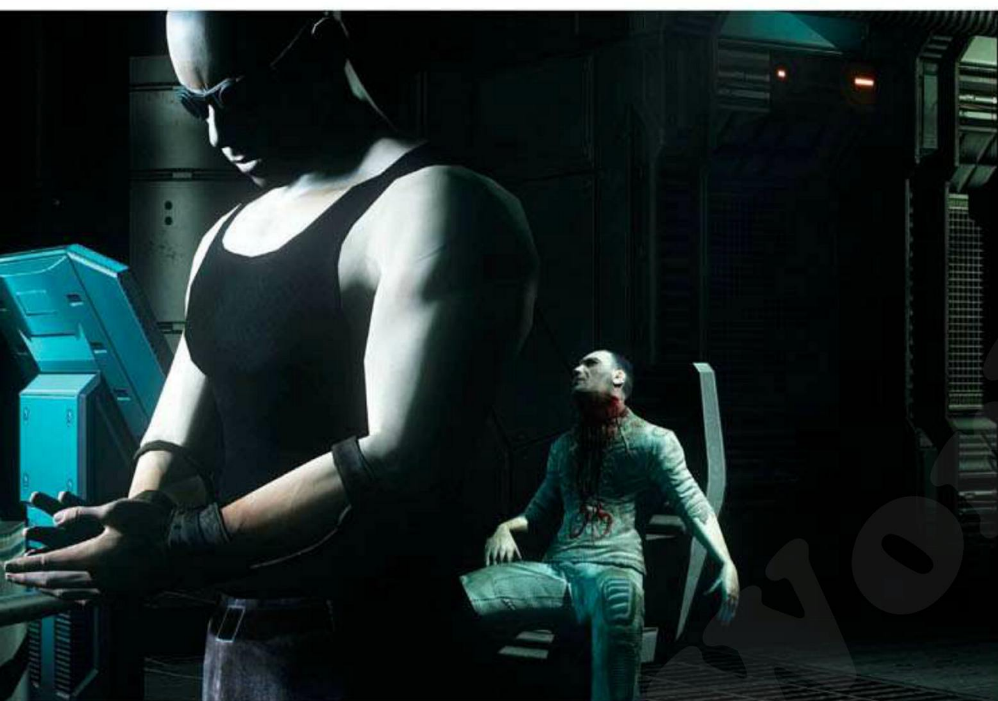
weapon sides facing the camera are more detailed than anything else. It's about figuring out which areas appear close to the camera and making those look good. And we tried to do that any way that we could.

Revas' 'trophy cabinet', the prison, is like a purpose-built gallery of performance capture.
This is where creative ideas and technological factors marry up and create something no one would have thought of to begin with. We're using this technology where you have the full-body motion capture and facial syncing, the whole deal. To be able to use that fully, you need to have a somewhat controlled environment. We liked the idea of the hubs as a design element, [and having] a central point where you get all your missions and return to. And, of course, it works with the story. They'd have this place here, and it'd be a scene where a lot of things would start to happen.

Was improvisation possible at all in these 'VO-cap' sessions?
The lines are all scripted, because we have to keep track of all the VO, of course, but stuff like Exbob with the masturbation thing… most of that was improvisation. There were a lot of things they recorded hoping we could use it, and it turned out we could. That's where some of the weirder bits come from.

Let's talk about the next-gen makeover. Was it consciously experimental?
I think it was a lot to do with the tools that were in the toolbox at the time. For the first game [released first on Xbox], it was really a stripped-down rendering, and the same was pretty much true for *The Darkness*. The guys kept improving the engine and we had new cool things to do, and we always wanted to have the ability to get the more movie-like appearance.

Is it hard working with an aesthetic where everything is so dark, characters included?
A lot of it's an aesthetic choice, and maybe it's a little bit crazy. We did do some tweaks, like putting little blinking lights on the Ghost Drone so you know where he is all the time… From an aesthetic point of view, we really like the dark, rubbery, plastic feel and look of that place. The stencil lighting we used for the first game – and we used a kind of hybrid lighting for this one – creates such a stark contrast that it becomes part of that look. As soon as you start to blur some of the edges and create a softer impression, it's lost. ■



What Games Are



TADHG KELLY

Why microconsoles may equal huge disruption

The game console is a form factor that has been with us ever since Atari dreamed up the idea of a dumb machine whose sole job was to interpret game input through a controller and render the results. In one format or another, it has essentially remained that. It may have gone 3D, digital-connected, become able to play movies and recognise gestural input, but the console is still the same basic idea.

Most significantly, consoles have always been heavily controlled. Publishing a console game is not the same as publishing music, a DVD or a book, where there might be some licensing or rights issues to deal with, but the power otherwise rests with the content owner. In the console sector, the platform owner takes a hand in determining what gets published and when, mandating what kind of content it wants to see and entering into complex agreements with publishers to that end.

Sometimes that heavy-handedness makes sense. The research, production and distribution costs for a console are enormous, as is the effort to spread a marketing story for why customers should buy into the platform. There is also the perception that being heavy-handed on quality control leads to better games.

However, control has its drawbacks. Console manufacturers have largely misunderstood the App Store, for example, even though some were in the business of selling digital games years before Apple. The idea of allowing developers to do as they please is not one that makes sense for their business, and the prospect of unrestrained development leads them to fear a loss of power.

However, that makes no sense in a world where the rest of publishing is moving to digital-native, regardless of the chaos that it brings. Services such as Google Play, Steam, iTunes and Amazon have progressed far further in distributing games in ways that console makers just can't match, and they seem out of step as a result.

For a while, the traditional approach looked archaic but unsolvable. Getting games onto TV was expensive and the expectations of consumers were what they were. For better or worse, the generational cycle was needed in order to make that business work at the mass market level, because that was the only route to profit.



The microconsole idea is so disruptive because it threatens to expose big consoles as being not-quite-precious

However, something has shifted. The console industry has long considered itself to be at the forefront of technology, but the reality is customers notice that difference less and less. The most recent generational leap was justified through the adoption of HD television, but beyond that the power argument has broken down. Customers preferred Wiis to PS3s in droves, and on PC the need for power is a weak motivator these days.

Good-enough hardware has become much cheaper to build and distribute, and that's opened up the possibility of a new kind of console. A small kind of console running on an open operating system with no disc drive. A console that connects to the Internet for all its games and sells them at developer-controlled prices. A console whose sales pitch isn't necessarily mass market, because it doesn't have all of the sunk costs that one of the big boys traditionally needed. I call it the microconsole, and I think its potential to disrupt the sector is enormous.

Microconsoles started with the weird story of the Ouya, which raised nearly $9m on Kickstarter. Subsequently, a number of other players have thrown their hats in the ring, such as PlayJam with the GameStick, Nvidia with the Shield, and Piston, which is backed by Valve. Most of them are promising to be low-powered, low-cost, online-native game machines. And that's just the start (some folks expect the Apple TV to become a microconsole, or for Samsung to develop one).

The microconsole idea is so disruptive because it threatens to expose big consoles as being not-quite-precious. While Nintendo may be trying to recapture the gamer market with the world's most complicated controller, and both Microsoft and Sony are lost in their webs of media and social ambitions, microconsoles seem to be about the simple delivery of games first.

Moreover, for developers it offers liberation. App platforms don't take such a direct hand in publishing or mandating what is allowed to be published. Instead they curate and service, otherwise leaving the game maker to make the game it wants to make. If you still work in the console sector, the power of that simple idea is hard to convey. In addition, the fact that most of the microconsoles are based on Android makes this doubly attractive: it should be easy to build versions for every platform; no muss, no fuss.

It's a big deal, but the microconsole also brings up an interesting question: for many journalists, the story of console has been a narrative of cyclic evolution and generational war. Journalists like the sense of ancient foes and traditions, heritage and saga.

What happens if all of that goes away? The gaming press has largely been expecting 2013 to be the Year Of The Console. But instead something new is happening. Something uncertain with no fixed narrative. 2013 is shaping up to be the Year Of The Microconsole.

Tadhg Kelly has worked in games, from tabletop to consoles, for nearly 20 years. Visit him at www.whatgamesare.com

In The Click Of It



CLINT HOCKING

A healthy approach

When setting out to design an action game where the most common systemic challenge that the player will generally confront is generic damage to her health and the constant ebb and flow of the threat of death, perhaps the most important decision a design team will make relates to how the health system functions.

As with any element of the core design, the first thing to consider in designing a new health system is what sort of aesthetic experience you want the game to afford. Decisions about the design of the health system need to actively support these aesthetics, and the more important combat is to the game (and consequently the more important death is in defining the boundary of the experience) the more seriously we must consider the design of the health system.

Decades ago, health was not typically a part of games. Arcade games offered the player a fixed number of lives for a fixed cost, and a single touch from a bullet, barrel or bomb was enough to instantly kill you. Three such touches and it was game over. While this design seems fairly simplistic, even crude, by today's standards, it's important to remember that the decisions that led to this standardised approach to 'health' were not arbitrary – they were in fact a result of higher level product goals from the arcade game machine manufacturers. For the most part, the goal was to achieve an optimal throughput rate for quarters. It turned out that a series of short-cycle, ever-increasing intensity spikes ending quickly in defeat would leave players hungry for another shot.

As games moved out of the arcade, this high cyclic rate became undesirable. Now, instead of turning players over as quickly as possible, the product goal (and, as a consequence, the design goal) was to sustain the engagement of the player for as long as possible. The concept of a health bar that could be depleted and restored – whether a series of hearts, or just a numerical value – became the norm. This would allow players to suffer incremental setbacks instead of binary failures, while at the same time encouraging them to push on a little further to find the next potion or health pack. "Just five more minutes," heralded the dawn of a new era of gaming.



Today, designers have a broader range of choices than ever in terms of how they design a health system

In the era of the PC shooter, the established product goals for games as a whole became standardised enough that designers were able to move away from focusing on designs that specifically targeted optimisation for revenue and toward those that delivered on specific aesthetic goals. Even today, we don't typically consider the design of a health system to be a product goal at all, or more precisely, the product goals for a game in a given genre have largely subsumed the general design of the health system, and what remains for the design team is to determine the specifics of an aesthetic variant within a predetermined design space.

In the PC shooter era, the typical health system design put an emphasis on tactical skill as well as longer-term strategic decision-making. Player characters were normally fragile, health and armour pick-ups were scarce, and death was fairly common. The aesthetics that were being served by these designs were the challenge-based but egalitarian aesthetics of the competitive shooter (even in singleplayer games), and it was not uncommon for games to be punishingly hard while still feeling 'fair'. For the most part these games often required players to decisively 'win' each encounter with not only minimal losses of health but minimal consumption of resources.

With the release of *Halo* (2001), the health system designs of the past era were overturned. Now the player had a regenerating shield that represented the significant majority of his health and which would recharge itself after several seconds under cover. It was no longer important for the player to maintain lasting discipline or to strategically manage resources: the repercussions of a single encounter would not cascade forward to subsequent encounters. The 'lean in' aesthetic values of the PC shooter era were giving way to the 'lean back' values of the console era.

Today, designers have a broader range of choices than ever in terms of how they design a health system. Games that focus on the aesthetics of exploration and narrative can offer health systems that de-emphasise combat to the point of near irrelevance in favour of allowing players to a chance to seek out improbable locations or story outcomes. Games that seek to maximise the intensity of room-to-room action can offer health systems that ensure each room can be as challenging and intense as the last. Games that want players to feel the rewards of having made a good decision about which weapon or potion or skill to choose hours beforehand can offer a health system that requires strategic thinking.

We're fortunate to be designing in an era where we have so many choices. The health system of a modern game can strike so many aesthetic chords that, perhaps for the first time ever, we can decide the kinds of emotions we want players to experience when they encounter that most common of systemic challenges.

Clint Hocking lives in Seattle and works at Valve. He blogs at www.clicknothing.com

The Possibility Space



RANDY SMITH

Lessons from a creative life

Videogame design has always come naturally to me. I grew up in a family that played card and boardgames, and I learned to program a VIC-20 in the third grade. My mom directed theatre, my dad was into technology, and one of my earliest memories is playing *Pong* in the '70s. I'm puzzled when others try and fail at it – can't they see they're doing it wrong? Or at least I would be if I wasn't miserable at an artform I love even more: music.

I enjoy playing and composing, but when it comes to completing anything, my brain is paralysed like it's trapped in amber and I have no idea what to do next. My understanding of the creative process has benefitted from this double-bladed introspection: watching myself fail in one category while succeeding in another. The past four years of writing for **Edge** has topped it off with an additional dimension of "being creative regularly and on a deadline." Here's some of what I've learned so far.

First of all, don't be afraid to fail. I get a clever idea for a column, but then re-reading it months later, it's either an embarrassment or perfect little jewel, and both feel exactly the same when I write them. Similarly, I've written songs and thought, 'This is weird garbage; no one else wants music like this,' then the following year either music like that is a new thing, or I was right to be critical.

Part of the reason I can't finish a song is because my ability to evaluate music for quality has far outstripped my compositional talents, leading me to shoot down every idea before it has a chance to develop, and I see this defeatism again and again when grown adults approach being creative in a new artform they admire. By contrast, 15-year-olds learn creativity so quickly in part because they have no reservations about publicly releasing a dozen self-indulgent, amateurish works every day. Trying is scary, and unfortunately you're probably not a perfect human being, but there's no way to be creative without taking risks, so put yourself out there.

Second, practice makes better. Many talents we think of as innate and fixed – singing, balance – are in part grounded in muscle groups that you can train and strengthen, and creativity is very similar. Yes, spacey right-brained imagination is



Reach for it, but don't stress about whose shoulders you might be standing on. We're all in a giant human pyramid

crucial to engendering new ideas, but the entire creative process is a cycle of experimentation and iteration of which the inception of an innovative idea inhabits just one quadrant, and more balanced skills such as evaluation and foresight populate the others. It's true that sometimes it feels like you've been struck by divine lightning and a wholly formed work tumbles out of your head (I would argue this phenomenon is just a delayed, accelerated version of the more common one), but rather than count on superlative luck occurring repeatedly, you should embrace the truth that most great works started out as shitty ones and underwent improvement during evaluation and experimentation iterations. There exist vast encyclopedias of inexpressible technique you can only learn by doing. Whether it's through your daily dozen self-indulgent releases or reworking the same idea across a broad range over years, you will improve at creativity by doing it over and over, strengthening your creative muscles, improving your ability to evaluate in-progress work, and refining your personal aesthetic.

Remember, too, that there are no new ideas – or rather all new ideas are actually operations on preexisting ones. They're amalgamated fractions, Frankensteins of the selectively filtered. Feel no shame about this, and don't block yourself when your output seems similar to works in your mental heavy rotation. You are a product of your environment; in fact, that is your value. I mean, don't repeatedly release a thinly veiled rewrite of your favourite song or videogame just because you love it so much. That's not even trying to be creative. Stretch and reach for it, but don't stress about whose shoulders you might be standing on. We're all in a giant human pyramid.

Finally, embrace self-editing. It's easy to get attached to your own material, especially early on when it's the hard-won product of difficult labour, or, in the case of the 15-year-olds, inherently precious by virtue of being an extension of yourself. When you get comfortable with the ebbs and flows of creative throughput, you realise the value of an idea is solely how well it fulfils its current function, and your audience probably doesn't care how long it took you or how much of a genius you are. The overall work needs to be great, and every idea that requires too many contortions and acrobatics before it fits into a supportive role needs to get kicked overboard. Maybe someday you'll get to use it somewhere else, but who cares. You're making art, not a list of interesting ideas. My column often starts off half again as long as they allow me to publish it, and it's amazing how much fat you can trim without losing substance. My worst levels in *Thief* went on forever like museums to myself, with too little intent to offer something for the player's benefit.

Next month will focus less on these left-brained, workhorse aspects of creativity and more on the phenomena of imagination and invention.

Randy Smith is the co-owner of Tiger Style. He has also compiled his favourite songs into a mix: www.bit.ly/VgA56n

Word Play



JAMES LEACH

The grind of gaming cliché

To see me right now is to see a broken man, an empty, hollow husk, albeit a slightly tubby one. The reason is that I've been playing too many games. 'Tis, as I write, the season for such things, but it isn't the fact I've been gaming like Timothy Leary on acid, it's that the clichés, the similarities, and the mindless elements have got to me.

Right, zombies. Please, let's not have any more zombies. Yes, we get it – they are, in many ways, the perfect enemy for devs. They're slow, don't require particularly human-like movements, largely free of speech (so no having to hire Stephen Fry for your expensive voice work), and you can kill them without guilt, because they're already dead, sort of. As long as they appear blood-stained and messy, you don't even need to worry if they look the same as each other. Zombie stories are, frankly, a combination of the childhood games of chase and hide and seek. Things don't get any more basic. So let's jog on. Slowly, but just quicker than the undead who – shock, horror – are stupid but relentless. Yawn.

Blood splattering onto the screen because I've been shot. OK, I've been shot. You don't have to penalise me further by reducing my vision. I feel bad enough already that I've been shot. I'd better eat something or collect that bottle of medicine. That mends gunshot trauma a treat.

Right, combat/insertion team, I've met you all. Which one of you is going to betray me? The boss? The lone, tough, sexy female? The silent, worrying, pent-up guy? No, it's never that guy. Tell you what, let's find out who's got the biggest backstory. Whoever it is, they're going to be the one who betrays me. Simple.

Let's head off. No, we need a briefing first. Fair enough, actually. I strongly suspect the military do have a little chat before a mission. Just to tell each other what to do and stuff. But I'd be willing to bet they do not turn it into some rousing, sound-bite-filled speech outlining the importance to freedom/the future/our children that we succeed. The urge, as a writer of games, to send your team out with their chests puffed up and tears in their eyes is almost insurmountable. In real life, Seal Team Six and the SAS leaders talk dryly about the details and timings. Oh, and they remind their squads that if you shoot the red barrels, they blow up. And there are always bad guys behind them.



Next mission. This, since my escort in the last one died, will always be called Redemption, unless it's called Salvation

Red barrels – there are always bad guys hiding behind these, and the barrels always blow up. How do you know who the bad guys are? They're white, with shaven heads, sunglasses, shoulders often far larger than is considered polite in the real world and dishevelled lightweight suits.

Right, we're out in the game world and there's a job to do. A job that every child, every dolphin and every wounded damn soldier on this messed up planet needs you to do. No wait, that emotional stuff was all in the briefing. Let's get on and… What's this? Yes, I pressed B. What? You've stopped the game just to tell me how a controller works? Just let me… No! A tutorial!? And I can't skip it. I'd better just idly check my phone until it's over.

Here we go, after the big weapon. This is either a gun turret currently being used by the enemy or it's a magic sword oddly being used by no one. It's a game changer, though, if we can get there. And yes we have! And yes, it's chewing up the bad guys! But wait. Simply by getting a weapon that makes killing easier, we've triggered a whole new army of enemies to rush us! Why didn't they do this before, when we were weaker? Why, it's almost as if somehow it'd be wrong for us to have a weapon for more than a second that gives us a huge advantage. It's like someone knew we'd do well, and they released or spawned a superior force to challenge us.

Luckily, we're facing an escort mission. They're the best, aren't they? The NPC I have to keep safe – who, in order to create tension, has got a personality I'm not supposed to like – will go faster than me when I'm walking, but slower than when I'm running. So shepherding them is what dev people call dynamic, and we call annoying.

Wait! I did my job properly and escorted the person who I don't like, but upon their arrival, they died or were killed. The game is at pains to let me know this isn't really my fault, but it is also keen to stress that I shall be blamed for it, and thus my sense of outraged injustice locks me tighter into the emotional journey I'm on.

Next mission. This, since my escort died, will always be called Redemption, unless it's called Salvation. And we're going to the mountains. Mountains look good in games. And, yes, there's the lens flare, perfectly on cue. And look how well those red barrels show up against the pristine, easy-to-draw snow. Getting into the mountain base, which, incidentally, is named after a bird of prey's home, such as Eagle's Lair, Falcon's Nest or something, is going to be a doddle.

The bad guys have thought of everything, though. Well, almost. They haven't made the base secure, but they have made it a giant puzzle, with gantries and walkways to traverse before you reach Reception. And there's a pool of water. Yes! It's the swimming level… (to be continued)

James Leach is a BAFTA Award-winning freelance writer who works on games and for ad agencies, TV, radio and online



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